





*Presented*

*to Playgoers at Eugene O'Neill's  
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of the Management.*

SIDNEY ROSS

KENNETH MACGOWAN

MODERN AMERICAN  
WRITERS

*Edited by* ERNEST BOYD

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I. JAMES BRANCH CABELL

By CARL VAN DOREN

II. EDITH WHARTON

By ROBERT MORSS LOVETT

III. THEODORE DREISER

By BURTON RASCOE

IV. H. L. MENCKEN

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V. EUGENE O'NEILL

By BARRETT H. CLARK

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*Photograph by Steichen  
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*Eugene O'Neill.*

# EUGENE O'NEILL

*By*

BARRETT H. CLARK

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TO  
GEORGE JEAN NATHAN  
GRATEFULLY



# EUGENE O'NEILL

THE personality of Eugene O'Neill is quite as extraordinary as his work. I had originally intended to offer in a few introductory pages a simple statement of the facts of his life, take my notes to him and have the finished product certified as historically correct.

But the subject of my study cannot be so lightly disposed of. The more I see of him and the more I bother his friends for their opinions, the more difficult does my task become.

Any intelligible discussion of his plays must be based upon some knowledge of their origin during the years when he was groping, though all unconsciously, for a meaning in life; when, like Synge, he loved all that had edge, "all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest, all that stings into life the sense of tragedy."

He is tall and slender and wiry, with long arms and strong hands. His body is lithe as an athlete's. His manner is shy and diffident; he nearly always seems embarrassed. Unless he is expressing ideas that interest him, he speaks haltingly or not at all. His silences are eloquent. His face in repose has a certain chiseled though not altogether cold severity, but his smile is disarmingly frank and engaging. With the ordinary amenities of social intercourse he has nothing to do, yet no one would

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dream of calling him discourteous. What interests him, what appeals to his sympathy and imagination, engrosses the whole of his attentive faculties; what does not pass by without making the slightest impression.

He is a poet, a passionate observer of humanity, a man to whom life is a tragic yet beautiful adventure; an artist in every fiber of his being; an uncompromising idealist in the practice of his art.

He knows well the worth of what he has done; his reticence and modesty are not the gestures of a literary poseur. This is what he wrote to me last autumn in answer to a letter of mine announcing the publisher's request that I write a book about him for the Modern American Writers series:

"Frankly, I honestly don't believe that I deserve any book—as yet! It seems to me there is too damn much of that premature sort of thing being done in America." In putting the matter before O'Neill I had already doubted the wisdom of rushing into print with an "official" biography; that would, indeed, be premature. He is still growing spiritually, and I can detect in him no sign of any hardening of the creative arteries. In bringing even a general estimate of his achievement to a full close, I might easily mislead my readers. It is maintained by most critics, for instance, that O'Neill is incapable of writing comedy, whereas the incorrigible fellow has up his sleeve a magnificent comedy actually ready for production on Broadway. He is so intensely alive and restless, there is no telling what he will do next.

Yet it is inevitable that books will be written about him. I pointed this out in my letter to O'Neill, adding that I



should attempt no formal epitaph, only a biographical sketch, a summing up of work already accomplished; no academic documentation; no attempt to "place" the subject and his work in any literary pigeonhole.

Before my first conference I had gathered together a mass of material, making detailed notes on what I had been able to get from his friends and associates. O'Neill went over this carefully, and pointed out that while my facts were fairly accurate, the total impression was not quite what it should be. Most of my picturesque anecdotes were apocryphal, and I had failed to present a three-dimensional likeness. There were friends of the earlier days I ought to see; they would give me what I needed. I saw and spoke with them, but my despair at being able to set down in black and white any sort of likeness of the man has only increased.

My introductory pages are, in a way, the result of collaboration.

To O'Neill himself I am most deeply indebted: he has done everything possible to correct my statements of fact. Among his early friends who have taken the trouble to tell me a great deal that has never gotten into print are Judge Frederick P. Latimer, former editor of the New London Telegraph; Mr. Charles Webster, who acted with Eugene in his father's company; Miss Edna Kenton, associated with the Provincetown Players from the earliest days; and the poet Harry Kemp. All four have furnished me a rich background, some of which I am regretfully forced to omit. Frank Shay, too, has told me wonderful tales of human interest. For various matters of fact I am indebted to Mr. Kenneth Macgowan, Mr. Alfred Krey-

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borg, Mr. George Jean Nathan, Professor George P. Baker, and Mr. Manuel Komroff. Dr. Isaac Goldberg has allowed me to use certain O'Neill letters, and Mr. Horace B. Liveright, of Boni & Liveright, has made it possible to reprint passages from the plays. Finally Miss Clara Weiss, of the Greenwich Village Theater, has spared neither time nor patience in her quest for programs, clippings, and such other material as was within her reach.

Other sources I have drawn upon—books and articles and programs—are listed at the end of this study. I need hardly say that for the critical opinions I alone am answerable.

Early in the year 1919 O'Neill sent me a brief autobiography for use in an article of mine, which appeared in the New York Sun (May 18), the first of its kind, I think, treating in a general way the man's achievements as a dramatist. He wrote:

"As for data relative to myself, it is a privilege to give you anything you might think of interest. I am inexperienced in this matter, however, and you must pardon me if what I am sending proves unsuitable. But it seems to me that a bare outline of my experiences preceding any attempt—or, in truth, desire—to write might be interesting as revealing the background of real life behind my work, and as proving that I have not written out of the top of my head.

"I am thirty. My undergraduate college education was confined to a freshman year at Princeton University, class of 1910. My first job was secretary of a mail order firm in New York. In 1909 I went with a mining engineer on

a gold prospecting trip to Spanish Honduras, Central America. At the end of six months I was invalided home—tropical malarial fever—no gold. After that I became assistant manager of a theatrical company touring the East and Middle West. My first voyage to sea followed—sixty-five days on a Norwegian barque, Boston to Buenos Aires. In Argentine I worked at various occupations—in the draughting department of the Westinghouse Electrical Company, in the wool house of a packing plant at La Plata, in the office of the Singer Sewing Machine Company in Buenos Aires. Followed another voyage at sea, tending mules in a cattle steamer, Buenos Aires to Durban, [South] Africa, and return. After that a lengthy period of complete destitution in Buenos Aires—‘on the beach’—terminated by my signing on as ordinary seaman on a British tramp steamer bound home for New York. My final experience at sea followed soon after this—able seaman on the American Line, New York-Southampton. The next winter I played a part in my father’s vaudeville version of Monte Cristo, touring the Far West. Then I worked as reporter on the New London, Connecticut, Telegraph. My health broke down, my lungs being affected, and I spent six months in a sanatorium thinking it over. It was in this enforced period of reflection that the urge to write first came to me. The next fall—I was twenty-four—I began my first play—*The Web*. In 1914-1915 I was a student in Professor Baker’s English 47 at Harvard. The Summer of 1916 I spent at Provincetown. It was during that summer the Provincetown Players, who have made the original productions of nearly all my short plays in New York, were first organized.”

A few days afterward O’Neill followed this up with a note in which he said: “I’m glad the stuff I sent you will fill the bill. I was rather afraid it looked as if I were making a Jack London hero of myself—whereas . . . I can-

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not recollect one heroic passage in those experiences!"

The outline is fairly accurate, so far as it goes. But to begin at the beginning—

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born October 16, 1888, at the Barrett House, then an uptown family hotel, now the Hotel Cadillac, on Broadway at 43rd Street, New York. He is the son of James O'Neill, the actor, and Ella Quinlan. His father was one of the most gifted American actors, a favorite from coast to coast, and his mother a quiet woman, whose influence over the boy can only be surmised. George Jean Nathan informs me that his own mother went to the same convent in the Middle West with Ella Quinlan, of whom she used to relate that the girl was strikingly beautiful, and regarded by students and teachers as the most pious girl in the convent. "My mother," O'Neill tells me, "was a fine pianist—exceptionally fine, I believe. I like good music, and always have, since my earliest childhood." James O'Neill was tall and handsome, one of the most impressive personalities in the theater of his generation. Booth had once said of him that he could play Othello better than himself, and at one time he alternated with him. "My father," says O'Neill, "was really a remarkable actor, but the enormous success of *Monte Cristo* kept him from doing other things. He could go out year after year and clear fifty thousand in a season. He thought then he simply couldn't afford to do anything else. But in his later years he was full of bitter regrets. He felt *Monte Cristo* had ruined his career as an artist."

To determine the influence of James O'Neill, Mrs.



O'Neill and their eldest son on Eugene will be the task of some future biographer. They were a remarkable family.

"My first seven years," writes O'Neill in a letter to Professor Arthur Hobson Quinn, "were spent mainly in the larger towns all over the United States—my mother accompanying my father on his road tours in *Monte Cristo* and repertoire, although she was never an actress and had rather an aversion for the . . . stage in general." During the next six years he attended Catholic boarding schools and in 1902 entered Betts Academy at Stamford. The autumn after his graduation in 1906 he matriculated at Princeton, where he remained until the following June. Before the final examination he was suspended because of some prank, which was not so serious as to prevent his returning, if he liked, after the expiration of one year. But college no longer interested him. He then took a job as secretary of a New York mail order business in which his father had an interest. His duties consisted mostly in attending to the correspondence, but we are told that the greater part of his work was done by a subordinate. O'Neill declares that he never took this work seriously, and when the firm went out of business, the youth turned his back on the office with a sigh of relief.

In 1909 he married Kathleen Jenkins of New York. The following year a son, Eugene, was born. A glance at our record of O'Neill's wanderings will show that the married life of the young couple was of short duration. The marriage, characterized laconically as "a mistake," was formally ended by a divorce in 1912.

Late in 1909 he set out on a gold-prospecting trip to

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Honduras. Though he is careful to minimize the presence of any romantic glamor in this and later exploits, there is no doubt that he was susceptible to the exotic scenes and people that formed the background of his years of wandering. His favorite writers of fiction were at that time Jack London and Conrad and Kipling, though in later years he read Marx and Kropotkin and Nietzsche. His first printed writings—as we shall see—were inspired largely by Kipling and London and Conrad.

When he returned home in 1910 his father was playing with Viola Allen in *The White Sister*, and Eugene was made assistant manager of the Company. He toured with it from St. Louis to Boston for three months, was not especially interested in what he was doing, and soon after the end of the tour he embarked on his first sea voyage.

This first voyage—"sixty-five days on a Norwegian barque"—landed him in Buenos Aires. He worked first for the Westinghouse Company, then for Swift at La Plata, and finally for the Singer Company in Buenos Aires again. These jobs were only stop-gaps, uncongenial temporary occupations; he either walked out in disgust or was discharged from each of them. He preferred hanging about the waterfront, making friends with sailors, stevedores, the down-and-outs. And he liked to drink. His bumming instincts, it is clear, were not altogether vicious; he was not a hopeless failure. He had simply not found himself. Probably he was not yet even looking for himself. On the other hand, he was no literary chap in search of copy. He bunked with the outcasts because he was himself an outcast. He worked when he had to

—when he could find work—in order to pay for board, room and liquor, and on occasion for such crude forms of café entertainment as he could find near the wharves of Buenos Aires.

He went to sea again, “tending mules on a cattle steamer, Buenos Aires to Durban, [South] Africa, and return.” Having no cash, he was not allowed to remain there. On his return to Buenos Aires, there followed the “lengthy period of complete destitution . . . ‘on the beach’—terminated by my signing as ordinary seaman on a British tramp steamer bound home for New York.” This was in 1911.

“In New York,” he says, “I lived at ‘Jimmy the Priest’s’: a waterfront dive, with a back room where you could sleep with your head on the table if you bought a schooner of beer. . . . Again I hung around the waterfront for a while. There, as at Buenos Aires, I picked up an occasional job” on a mail boat. After a few weeks, or months, “I shipped on the American Liner ‘New York,’ as an able seaman. I made the voyage to Southampton . . . and came back on the ‘Philadelphia.’”

One day, some time after his last voyage, he happened to win at gambling what was for him a fairly large sum of money. That, of course, meant a wild party. How long afterward he couldn’t tell me, but probably a day or two, O’Neill found himself aboard a through train with a ticket for New Orleans. On his arrival he learned that his father was playing the ever-popular *Monte Cristo*. The prodigal presented himself to his perplexed parent and appealed for money enough to buy a return ticket. The elder O’Neill was used to this kind of appeal. The

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story is told that once Eugene and his elder brother awaited Monte Cristo at the stage door after a matinée performance they had both attended. Instead of asking point-blank for a gift, they reminded the actor of the great scene in which he slapped his pockets, exultantly proclaiming that he had millions with which to conquer the world. Could he not, therefore, his sons asked, loosen up and give them a dollar?

I leave the story, because O'Neill says it is characteristic—even if it is not true.

In New Orleans no fatted calf was served up, and Eugene was offered the choice of getting back north by his own devices or joining the troupe as an actor. New York is a long way from New Orleans, and Eugene's name was added to the payroll of the *Monte Cristo* Company. He learned his small part on the train and appeared for the first time as an actor in Ogden, Utah. Mr. Charles Webster, who was in the company, says that O'Neill played the unimportant rôle of a jailer. Mr. Webster was amused by Eugene's apparent astonishment at his—Webster's—ability to play three different parts in the same show. Sometimes, when the elder O'Neill complained of his acting, Eugene would gravely protest, declaring it was a wonder that in such a play he could do anything at all.

The company played the Orpheum circuit in the cities of the Far West. At the close of the season, fifteen weeks later, the O'Neills returned to their summer home in New London. There in August O'Neill began work as cub reporter on the Telegraph. He did regular reporting and contributed verse to a "colyum" about twice a week for



nearly six months. It has been said that his half year as a newspaper man was a period of unhappiness and depression. But he assures me, with a smile, that he was happy, interested in his work, and fortunate in his personal associations. His friendship for the boss, Frederick P. Latimer, who liked and believed in him, meant a great deal in those days. It was he who encouraged O'Neill to write. "He's the first one," he told me, "who really thought I had something to say, and believed I could say it."

"As we used to talk together," the Judge told me, "and argue our different philosophies, I thought he was the most stubborn and irreconcilable social rebel that I had ever met. We appreciated each other's sympathies, but to each, in the moralities and religious thought and political notions, the other was 'all wet.'"

In December of that year (1912) O'Neill's health broke down. Up to this time his life had been most irregular: he had spent little time at home; for sixteen years he had been either at school, traveling with his parents, venturing forth on the high seas, or drifting from job to job in distant parts of North and South America; his nervous system, never too strong, had been seriously taxed by a good deal of hard and indiscriminate drinking. It had not occurred to him that it might be necessary to think of his health.

Now suddenly the doctor informed him that he had a touch of tuberculosis, and for the first time he was forced to take hold of himself. He was ordered to a sanatorium, and on Christmas Eve he entered Gaylord Farm, at Wallingford, Connecticut.

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During the winter and spring of 1912-13 he began, as he says, "thinking it over." At Gaylord the urge to write first came to him—the desire to express what he knew of life, to set forth his philosophy, his aspirations, and his dreams in the form of drama.

He had dabbled in verse, and during his six months on the Telegraph he had learned how to tell a "story." But such writing as he had done was what nearly all young men turn out before tackling the more important jobs of life. Up to the time of his breakdown he "never had any definite idea" what he wanted to do. "My father," he says, "was worried about me. He didn't know how to handle me, and he wanted me to settle down and make a living. He often used to think I was just crazy."

The five months at Gaylord marked the turning-point in his life.

Elsewhere he states:

"... It was at Gaylord that my mind got the chance to establish itself, to digest and evaluate the impressions of many past years in which one experience had crowded on another with never a second's reflection. At Gaylord I really thought about my life for the first time, about past and future. Undoubtedly the inactivity forced upon me by the life at a san forced me to mental activity, especially as I had always been high-strung and nervous temperamentally." <sup>1</sup>

He was "discharged as arrested," being diagnosed as an uninteresting case—"there was so little wrong with him." In the late spring he spent some time with his family in New London, and when his father's season opened,

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Outdoor Life*, 1923.

he went to live with the Rippins, an English family whose home overlooked Long Island Sound. Here he lived for over a year, reading, resting, exercising—and writing. The doctor's warning had sunk deep into his consciousness, and he set to work building up his health. "I went swimming in the Sound," he told me, "every day during the winter."

In fifteen or sixteen months' time he wrote eleven one-act plays, two long ones, and some verses. The new régime agreed with him. "After I left the san," he says, "I kept up the sleeping outdoors for over a year and kept pretty careful watch over myself generally. In fact, with more or less frequent lapses due to rehearsals in New York, etc., I've lived a pretty healthy outdoor life ever since. It's easy, for I much prefer it to city life anyway."

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of O'Neill's breakdown in the spring of 1913. The youth who entered Gaylord and the man who left it were two different beings. The first was a wild boy who loved life in the raw, whose restless curiosity drove him from family and friends in search of strange countries and still stranger men. He drank when he had the money—which was not so very often. In his wanderings he came to know men, not their hypocritical manners and the masks they wear to the world, but their thoughts and hearts. He was not an intruder in the underworld, but a part of it. Like Gorky, he seems to have found in the outcast some consoling reality, some satisfactory reading of life.

I am told by Kemp that once a feeble-minded boy of six formed a deep affection for him, and it seems that O'Neill took pains to be kind to him. There was some-

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thing strangely tender in the boy's longing to know things, and in the man's efforts to explain. One day the two were sitting on the beach at Provincetown. The boy wondered what was beyond the Point, and what beyond the sea, and what beyond Europe? "The horizon," answered O'Neill. "But what," persisted the lad, "is beyond the horizon?"

It exemplifies O'Neill's utter simplicity of character, a thing most of his friends apparently cannot understand.

The drinking exploits of the early days were indeed spectacular, and that is surely the reason for the more spectacular tales that have been repeated about them. But it stands to reason that no one could do the enormous amount of work which O'Neill has done during the past twelve years without the most rigid discipline. He is continually solicitous about his health, for without that work is impossible, and work is his first consideration. Exercise is a fetish to him. "I wanted," he tells me, "to be a two-fisted Jack London 'he-man' sailor."

"At Provincetown," says Harry Kemp, "he used to lie on the beach for hours in his bathing-suit—when he was not working. He's one of the finest swimmers I've ever seen. He can do the Crawl as if he'd been born to it. He used often to go away out to the Point. Agnes [Mrs. O'Neill] was worried as the devil, but nothing'd stop Gene. And you ought to see him in his Eskimo kayak. He'd get thinking out some idea, and round the Point in the roughest weather."

Plenty of exercise and hard work has been the rule since 1913. Kemp recalls how in the coldest days, in his old shack at Provincetown the first year or two, O'Neill would



wrap himself up in a blanket, put an oil-burner under him, and write hour after hour. Though on friendly terms with other writers, he would have the courage to hang the "Go to Hell" sign on his door during working hours. He knew what he wanted, and he usually got it.

On leaving the sanatorium, he had made up his mind that he wanted to write plays. He had once thought he could write poetry: Judge Latimer told me Eugene didn't like it when he was told that his forte was prose, not poetry, but O'Neill states that what he wrote for the paper was rarely serious verse. He was a reporter who contributed jingles to a "colyum"; that was part of his job. He has, however, written a good deal of verse that means something to him. He still has a large notebook "up home," full of verses accumulated during fifteen years. He will not publish it. I have not seen the collection, but if I ever expand this little sketch, I shall remind him of the promise I rather forced from him to show it to me. But Alfred Kreymborg tells me he saw several of the poems when he was running *Broom*. The serious verses "had fine stuff in them." I wonder why "Krimmie" didn't print some?

The truth is that O'Neill was not cut out for a literary career; he has never been a "literary" man. The pursuit of the *mot juste* was of little importance to him compared with the search for life. When he began work as a dramatist, he was a young man with an insatiable zest for life at first hand. He had come to grips with existence, and the moment he had reached the saturation point and drunk in all he could assimilate, he had to express it through his art. The plays, it must be remembered, al-

ways came after, grew out of, his experience. He was, and has always been, a seeker of what lies beyond the horizon, of the elusive forms of beauty taking shape in the imagination of the poet.

When he began in earnest, his equipment was a clear mind and a fund of human experience—of a kind. He had read much, but not from a five-foot shelf; not for cultural purposes or self-improvement, but for spiritual sustenance. He was familiar with Nietzsche in translation before he went to Harvard, and there, with the aid of a German grammar and dictionary in his hours of leisure, he read the whole of *Zarathustra* in the original in order to acquire a sufficient working knowledge of German to read the plays of Wedekind, few of which were then available in translated form.

By the time he was ready to write he knew a good deal about the theater. First he had had experience with his father, but what he knew of the old-school drama served only to intensify his dislike of its routine tricks.

His own earliest attempts show unmistakable signs of revolt against the American drama of the past, but he knew that drama fairly well. And he was tolerably well up on recent drama. Even during his wander-years he went often to the theater. As a son of James O'Neill he could get free seats at almost any box office. He was especially impressed by Nazimova's first productions of Ibsen. He was also, in later years, a voracious reader of plays. During his stay at the Rippins' he read nearly all the time when he was not exercising or writing.

"I read about everything I could lay hands on: the Greeks, the Elizabethans—practically all the classics—

and of course all the moderns. Ibsen and Strindberg, especially Strindberg."

His year and more of 'prentice work had shown him that he could very well use certain technical advice. There was Baker and his already famous 47 playwriting class at Harvard, and at the suggestion of his friend Clayton Hamilton, in the fall of 1914, Eugene went to Cambridge. At Harvard he wrote two plays, *The Personal Equation*, in four acts (at one time called *The Second Engineer*), and a one-acter, dramatized from a Black Cat story, called *The Dear Doctor*.

A fellow-student of his (in a personal letter to me) writes his impression of O'Neill at Cambridge:

"My own memory of O'Neill is that he was good-looking, very nervous, extremely impatient with 47, and anxious to get down to live in Greenwich Village. I happen to remember two things he wrote: a one-act farce . . . which he called *The Dear Doctor*, and a long play about sea life called *The Second Engineer*. The first was inconspicuous . . . and the latter was labored and stiff. He was friendly, though rather uneasy and inarticulate at times. You got the impression that he trembled a little, and seemed trying to keep from stuttering. But when he delivered himself of a remark, it was impressive . . . I always thought him very likeable."

What did O'Neill get out of English 47?

"Well," he tells me, "not very much out of the class-work itself. Necessarily, most of what Baker had to teach the beginners about the theater as a physical medium was old stuff to me. Though on one occasion

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Baker told me he didn't think *Bound East for Cardiff* (written before I entered the class) was a play at all, I respected his judgment. The plays I wrote for him were rotten. The long one was a rambling thing about a seamen's and firemen's strike. But it's rather funny about the one-acter. We thought it was slick enough for vaudeville, but when I began to see about the rights I found the story I'd based it on was stolen from a successful vaudeville sketch!—But I did get a great deal from Baker—personally. He encouraged me, made me feel it was worth while going ahead. My personal association with him meant the devil of a lot to me at that time."

Professor Baker's own words (in a letter to me written in January, 1926) are of particular interest:

"When O'Neill was working with me, he showed by the end of the year that he already knew how to write well in the one-act form, but he could not as yet manage the longer forms. I was very eager that he should return for a second year of work in these longer forms, but did not know till later that, though equally eager, his means at the moment made this impossible. O'Neill, when with me, worked steadily and with increasing effectiveness. He seemed absorbedly interested in what he was trying to do. Because of his wider experience of life, he seemed a good deal older than most of the men in the course, although not really so in years. He seemed a little aloof, though I never found him so personally. This, I think, came quite as much from a certain awe of him in his fellow-students because of his wider experiences, as from any holding apart by him. . . . After all these years my pleasant memory of O'Neill in the work is far more vivid than the memory of the details of that work."

Whatever the causes that ultimately determined his course, O'Neill spent the winter of 1915-16 in and around Greenwich Village, New York, where he found congenial companions primarily among the Radicals of the Labor movement, I.W.W.'s and the Anarchist group, as well as among the true native villagers, the negro and Italian inhabitants of the quarter. It was not until he went to Provincetown that he met the people who founded the Players and were the pioneers in the movement: George Cram Cook, Susan Glaspell, Frank Shay, Frederick Burt, Mary Heaton Vorse, Wilbur Daniel Steele, Harry Kemp, "Teddy" Ballantine, Neith Boyce, and Hutchins Hapgood.

These people, under the inspiring leadership of Cook, had played two short summer seasons of one-acters in 1915 and 1916. It was after the second season that the Provincetown Players were formally organized. As such they never played in the town that gave them their name.

The Wharf Theater, owned by Mary Heaton Vorse, was used for the production of four bills of one-act plays and one review bill. This was in 1916, when O'Neill's first play was produced. One day early that summer somebody remarked to Susan Glaspell that a young fellow had just come to the village with a trunk full of plays. "Well, tell him we don't need a trunk full, but ask him to bring one." That was *Bound East for Cardiff*.

"Cook," O'Neill tells me, "was the big man, the dominating and inspiring genius of the Players. Always enthusiastic, vital, impatient with everything that smacked of falsity or compromise, he represented the spirit of revolt



against the old worn-out traditions, the commercial theater, the tawdry artificialities of the stage. I owe a tremendous lot to the Players—they encouraged me to write, and produced all my early and many of my later plays. But I can't honestly say I would not have gone on writing plays if it hadn't been for them. I had already gone too far ever to quit."

Still, the question is not whether he would have written, but how far the Players helped him to write the sort of plays he did write. Miss Edna Kenton, who probably knows more about the matter than any one else, has given (in the introductory pages of Cook's *Greek Coins*) a carefully reasoned statement of her opinion:

"But there is no doubt at all that, had he not had our Playwrights' Theater and our experimental stage to use always precisely as he wished to use them, he would have reached Broadway by quite another road and with quite other plays . . . he had not only our stage; he had our 'subscription list,' and he used its members, bill after bill, season after season, in ways they could never dream of; played with them and on them, with never need for a thought of them except as stark laboratory reactions to his own experimentations. No other American playwright has ever had such prolonged preliminary freedom with stage and audience alike."

It is equally true that if it hadn't been for the plays of O'Neill and Miss Glaspell there would have been no reason for the continuance of the Theater—and probably no subscribers.

Here I wish I could describe the early days at Provincetown. Frank Shay and Harry Kemp and Miss Kenton

have given me vivid accounts and related many anecdotes, but they look cold in print.

Harry Kemp could tell of his efforts to discuss books and poetry, and of his disappointment when the talk drifted in other directions. Even as late as 1923, he was hoping to have a really good chance to talk shop. At last one day he noticed that Gene began to stop regularly at his house. It seemed that the puzzling fellow was warming up. But Kemp realized to his dismay that Gene invariably asked to retire a moment every time he called. So one day he and Mrs. Kemp determined to prevent his asking. He was made to drink more tea than he wanted and not allowed to make the usual request. I think he must have learned his lesson, for he now admits that the joke was on him. He still likes Kemp even if he once made social calls an excuse to use Kemp's lavatory.

Then who could tell that delightful tale of the lonely writer O'Neill had invited to spend a few weeks with him during Mrs. O'Neill's absence? Kemp describes the man sitting day after day face to face with his uncommunicative host, and at the end of a week rising up in rage and despair and cursing him before going home to enjoy his own company.

I must pass on quickly, simply expressing the hope that some one will write the whole history of the Provincetown Players. The first chapter belongs in this place.

Among the plays O'Neill had brought to Provincetown were the five that had been published in book form. In 1914 Richard G. Badger of Boston issued in his *American Dramatists' Series*, a book entitled *Thirst and Other*

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*One-act Plays by Eugene G. O'Neill.* The manuscript had been offered here and there, but no one would risk publishing the book until Mr. Badger accepted it on condition that the author should bear all the expenses. To James O'Neill, interpreter of the old romantic drama, we are indebted for having paid the costs of publication of the first plays of Eugene O'Neill, pioneer of a new American drama. The book did not sell. Mr. Clayton Hamilton states that he wrote the only review of it that ever appeared. I have not seen his notice, but I know what it means to be encouraged by him. The notice of his young friend's first book must have been kindly and encouraging.

O'Neill's father then sent Eugene to Harvard in the hope that there he would find himself. He awaited developments. It is often stated that the old gentleman was hard on the boy, objecting to Eugene's having anything to do with the theater; even that he kept him penniless and practically a prisoner in order to bring him to terms. Doubtless he was worried, but above all, as O'Neill tells me, he was perplexed. "He did believe in me—in a way, but as I've said, he just thought I was crazy. He didn't see why I should write the kind of plays I did, because there was no market for them, but he must have thought there was something to them. He believed I might some day amount to something—if I lived."

The first O'Neill play to be produced was *Bound East for Cardiff*. It saw the light in the Wharf Theater at Provincetown, and was put on by the group that was later to become the Provincetown Players, in the second bill of the summer season. O'Neill acted the part of the

Second Mate. His acting, I am informed, was not impressive, though it was not altogether bad.

Then came *Thirst*, in the fourth bill, and again O'Neill acted, this time as the Negro Sailor. Except for his appearance in a New York production of *Before Breakfast*, in which he assumed the rôle of the arm of the non-speaking character, these are the only plays of his in which he has acted.

That O'Neill was appreciated in those early days is clear from statements made to me by Frank Shay and others, and in the following passage recently written by Miss Kenton:

“‘You don't know Gene yet,’ he [Cook] told me. ‘You don't know his plays. But you will. And the world will know Gene's plays some day. This year, on the night he first came to Provincetown and read us *Bound East for Cardiff*, we knew we had something to go on with.’” Shay tells me that he and others who saw the first O'Neill productions felt at once that a new power had come into being. “The effect produced on us by *Bound East* and *Thirst* was so strong, we all felt instinctively we had had a profound experience.”

After the summer season the group returned to New York and, as the Provincetown Players, opened in Macdougall Street the Playwrights' Theater. That name was O'Neill's suggestion. He insisted that only new American plays should be performed, though some of the group at times wanted to experiment with Chekhov and other foreigners.

During the next four years all but one of O'Neill's short plays were produced here for the first time.

But from the very first he had been trying his hand at long plays. He had worked hard after leaving the "san"; he had done his best at Cambridge; and at Provincetown Kemp tells me he never knew any one who labored so consistently. It was reasonable to hope that he might some day sell a manuscript to a Broadway manager. He not only hoped, he worked and planned.

Meantime, there were other channels, other methods of making his way. Already in 1916 the venturesome Frank Shay had published in his *Provincetown Plays* O'Neill's *Before Breakfast* and *Bound East for Cardiff*. But there was a still wider world: like many of us who were growing up in those exciting years of 1917 and 1918, O'Neill used to read the criticisms of Mencken and Nathan in the *Smart Set*. It occurred to him that the editors might give him advice.

"The first [general] recognition of any kind that I received," says O'Neill, "was through 'The Smart Set.' I sent three of my one-acters to Mencken, the editor. They were all three fo'c'sle plays, not at all the kind of thing 'The Smart Set' prints. I wrote Mencken that I knew this, but that I merely wanted his opinion of them. I had a fine letter from him, saying that he liked them and was sending them to George Jean Nathan, the dramatic critic. I received a letter from Nathan also, and to my surprise the three plays were published in 'The Smart Set'! . . ."

O'Neill admits that this needs modification. For one thing, the Provincetown Players had already acted his plays, and *Seven Arts Magazine* printed not only his story *Tomorrow* but accepted *In the Zone* for publication.



But the Smart Set represented to him a wider and more general public, and recognition from Mencken and Nathan meant a sort of disinterested and impersonal critical approval.

The three plays printed in the Smart Set were *The Long Voyage Home*, *Ile*, and *The Moon of the Caribbees*. They appeared in 1917 and 1918. It was later through the interest and enthusiasm of Nathan that *Beyond the Horizon* and *Gold* were brought to the attention of John D. Williams, and he was instrumental in placing *Anna Christie* and *The Fountain*.

Even before O'Neill went to Harvard he had tried to place manuscripts through his own efforts. "I sent," he says, "two of the plays to a New York manager. After two years, having heard nothing from them, I wrote asking for their return." The same old story. George C. Tyler told O'Neill afterward that he had never read the scripts when they first came to him, "because plays by actors' sons are never good!"

Though his plays have sometimes suffered from inadequate production and unintelligent criticism, O'Neill has no special cause for complaint against the professional or semi-professional world. If commercial managers returned his manuscripts, there were always the Provincetown Players, and much later the Greenwich Village Theater, ready to risk money and time and labor on any play he might offer.

Since the production of *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920 the man's position as our leading dramatist has not been seriously challenged. The record from that time on is brief and, so far as mere biographical data are concerned,

of no great moment. Such facts as are necessary for the better understanding of his plays I shall treat in connection with my analysis of the individual works. He has twice received the Pulitzer Prize, and once the medal awarded for artistic achievement by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His fame has spread abroad: his plays are produced and read in England and France, Germany, Russia, Czechoslovakia, and the Scandinavian countries; two of his plays have been seen in Japan. At the age of thirty-seven he has become an almost legendary figure.

And yet he is not known on the lecture platform. If he asked for a ticket at the box-office of a Broadway theater there is probably not a soul who would recognize him. He rarely goes to the theater, preferring to read plays.<sup>2</sup> He used to allow Cook to supervise the production of his one-acters at the Playwrights' Theater, and even now he attends rehearsals of few of his plays. The nervous strain is too great, especially when he sees something going wrong with the acting. The only plays he has actually seen through in rehearsal are *Beyond the Horizon*, *Anna Christie*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *All God's*

<sup>2</sup> "I hardly ever go to the theater . . . although I read all the plays I can get. I don't go to the theater because I can always do a better production in my mind. . . . Nor do I ever go to see one of my own plays—have seen only three of them since they started coming out. My real reason for this is that I was practically brought up in the theater . . . and I know [ . . . too much about] the technique of acting. . . . [Acting, except when rarely inspired, simply gets between me and the play.] . . ." N. Y. Herald-Tribune, Nov. 10, 1924.

Author's note. Here, and later, I indicate the words or passages from published interviews which have been added to by O'Neill in the MS or proofs. It was necessary to do this, because O'Neill says that in nearly all the printed interviews there are errors.—B. H. C.

*Chillun Got Wings, The Hairy Ape, and The Great God Brown.*

To interview him is almost as hard as getting a statement out of our present Chief Executive. Except when he is among intimate friends, he still (as in the days at Harvard) seems "rather uneasy and inarticulate." He is so seclusive that he will not even eat in a restaurant if he can help it. He may like publicity and the ordinary forms of adulation accorded to well-known personages, but no one would ever know it. He is a shy, retiring artist, sensitive, nervous. Except where his art is concerned, he does not give much of a damn about anything. He spends most of his time on his place near Ridgefield, Connecticut, with his wife and the two children of his second marriage. Summers since 1918 (with one exception) he has spent at Peakèd Hill, a lonely made-over life-saving station at Provincetown, but last year he found Bermuda to his liking, and worked there for seven months on his new plays.

His second marriage in 1918, with Agnes Boulton, has been happy and successful. There are two children—a boy of six and a baby girl. To Mrs. O'Neill the dramatist owes a great deal more than can be properly set down in these pages.

He spends nearly half his day writing and the rest of the time he devotes to swimming, tennis, boating and other forms of exercise. He is even regarded by the community in which he lives as almost a human citizen. If additional proof of his "good" habits are required, I refer you to the American Magazine for November, 1922, in which a special article on him appeared, supplemented by a full-

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page portrait. The writer put the seal of ultimate approval upon him when she declared that he had a "regular habit of work."

Since 1923 he has been associated with Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones in the management of the Greenwich Village Theater. For a short period after the reorganization of the Provincetown group he was an associate director. During the past year or so he has acted simply in an advisory capacity.

Here, then, is a brief outline of the life of Eugene O'Neill up to the age of thirty-seven. It will be necessary to go over some of the same ground again in connection with our study of his work, for as I have already said, that is a direct outgrowth of his personal experiences. O'Neill is a man who has lived first and written afterward, not a writer who makes deliberate use of his experiences as copy.

"Ask him what he used to drink," was George Jean Nathan's advice when I inquired how far I ought to discuss personal matters. "I know he used to take his whiskey straight, but in South America he must have had strange and wonderful concoctions. Remember, if he hadn't drunk the way he did and mixed with so many kinds of people in those early days we probably shouldn't have had his plays."

Not a bad idea, but I don't think the kind of drink makes so much difference. I see no falling off in our native literature since Prohibition, and therefore conclude that the quality of a man's potations cannot seriously affect the quality of his writing. If it weren't that a good part of the O'Neill legend centered round the question of drink, I could dismiss the matter by saying that as a young man he drank heavily on occasion, while during the past decade or so he has indulged only on rare occasions. "Altogether too much damn nonsense," he told me, "has been written since the beginning of time about the dissipation of artists. Why, there are fifty times more real drunkards among the Bohemians who play at art, and probably still more among the people who never think about art at all. The artist drinks, when he does drink, for relaxation, for forgetfulness, for any purpose except his art. You've got to have all your critical and creative faculties about you when you are working. I never attempt to write a line when I'm not strictly on the wagon. I don't think anything worth reading was ever written by any one who was drunk when he wrote it. This



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is not morality. It's physiology. Dope I know nothing about, but I suspect even De Quincey was boasting what a devil he was!"

Just when O'Neill began writing I am not sure, but the first mention of it dates from the year 1909, either before or during his first sea voyage. He wrote verse. It must have been youthful and imitative, judging from the specimens I have seen in the New London Telegraph, written three years later. These come next in order, because if he wrote anything else in his years of wandering, there is no further record of it.

Frederick P. (now Judge) Latimer ran the New London Telegraph when O'Neill was a reporter. O'Neill contributed a good deal of light verse during the autumn and early winter of 1912.

"He was the cub reporter," writes Judge Latimer (in a letter to me), "and the four things about him that immediately impressed me were his modesty, his native gentlemanliness, his wonderful eyes, and his literary style. It was evident at once that this was no ordinary boy, and I watched what he thought and wrote and did with extreme interest. From flashes in the quality of the stuff he gave the paper . . . I was so struck that I told his father that Eugene did not have merely talent, but a very high order of genius, and that if he lived he would certainly become famous. I believe I am the first who ever made that prediction."

But Judge Latimer thought, and still thinks, that Eugene could write prose fiction. (I may say in passing that he has published only one story, *Tomorrow*, which appeared in *Seven Arts Magazine* eight years ago.)

I recently went through the old files of the Telegraph. The O'Neill contributions, except his reportorial write-ups (which I did not identify), are verses on the editorial page, most of them in a "colyum" under the heading *Laconics*. The first of these was printed August 26, and the last December 9. They are all signed, sometimes E. O'Neill, sometimes Eugene O'Neill, once "Tigean Te Oa'Neill," and once (to an ambitious political parody on *Hiawatha*) Eugene Gladstone O'Neill. The twenty-four pieces show little besides a youthful eagerness to play with verse-forms, though some have a touch of the earnestness which is one of his outstanding characteristics as a dramatist. Every one of them is an imitation of or parody on some writer. The chief influences I detected were Kipling and Villon, and the best parodies were on Walt Mason, Burns and Service. The year 1912 was full of political interest, and several of the longer verses were bitter political satires. But the following specimen, which I reprint in its entirety, is characteristic of O'Neill's humorous jingles at the time. It appeared September 28.

#### IT'S GREAT WHEN YOU GET IN

They told me the water was lovely,  
That I ought to go for a swim,  
The air was maybe a trifle cool,  
"You won't mind it when you get in."

So I journeyed cheerfully beachward,  
And nobody put me wise,  
But every one boosted my courage  
With an earful of jovial lies.

The Sound looked cold and clammy,  
 The water seemed chilly and gray,  
 But I hastened into my bathing suit  
 And floundered into the spray.

Believe me, the moment I touched it  
 I realized then and there  
 That the fretful sea was not meant for me,  
 But fixed for a polar bear.

I didn't swim for distance,  
 I didn't do the crawl  
 (They asked why I failed to reach the raft,  
 And I told them to hire a hall),

But I girded my icy garments  
 Round my quaking limbs so blue,  
 And I beat it back to the bath house  
 To warm up for an age or two.

I felt like a frozen mummy  
 In an icy winding sheet.  
 It took me over an hour  
 To calm my chattering teeth.

And I sympathized with Perry,  
 I wept for Amundsen's woes,  
 As I tried to awaken some life in  
 My still unconscious toes.

So be warned by my experience  
 And shun the flowing sea,  
 When the chill winds of September  
 Blow sad and drearily.

Heed not the tempter's chatter,  
Pass them the skeptic's grin,  
For the greatest bull that a boob can pull  
Is "It's great when you get in."

—E. G. O'Neill.

Characteristically, his farewell contribution (December 9) is a parody on *Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind*, the refrain of which expresses a loathing for winter.

As I look through the other "poems" I find a great deal that is crude and callow, an occasional touch of vulgarity, and few signs of any literary gift. But there is a line here and there that brings you to a sudden stop. The following lines might well go on the title-page of *The Moon of the Caribbees*:

For it's grand to lie on the hatches  
In the glowing tropic night,  
When the sky is clear and the stars seem near  
And the wake is a trail of light.

A few verses were written at the sanatorium, but by that time O'Neill had begun thinking seriously of the theater. His contributions to the *Telegraph* were his artistic wild oats, and I have only referred to them because they are a part of his development as an artist.

Of the thirteen plays he wrote before going to Cambridge, only six have survived. The earliest, which was never produced or published, was called *A Wife for Life*. It was written for vaudeville. The idea had occurred to him when he was playing the Orpheum circuit with his father. It was the first and last play he ever wrote with

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his eye exclusively on the box-office. It was, he tells me, the worst of his efforts.

This, then, and not *The Web*, was his first play. It was written shortly after he left Gaylord.

The first play that was preserved is *The Web*. It was written early in the fall of 1913, and printed in the *Thirst* volume the next year.

Of the one-acters written in 1914 *Thirst*, *Recklessness*, *Warnings*, and *Bound East for Cardiff* alone have survived. A long play, *Bread and Butter*, and a short one, *Abortion*, were destroyed without having been acted. *Thirst* and *Bound East* were produced by the Provincetown Players two years later.

This now brings us up to the first group of plays about which we can form any judgment, *Thirst*, and the four others included in the volume.

The five plays in the *Thirst* volume are definitely repudiated, and will never be reprinted with the author's permission. Only two of them have had authorized productions—*Thirst* and *Fog*.

*The Web* comes first in order of composition. It will afford satisfaction to those critics who complain of O'Neill's profanity to know that the first of his surviving plays opens with "Gawd! What a night!"<sup>3</sup> This is a crude melodramatic piece about a prostitute and her protector. The scene is a "squalid bedroom on the top floor of a rooming house on the lower East Side, New

<sup>3</sup> I must tell of the censor in one of our large southern cities who, before allowing *Anna Christie* to be acted, insisted on changing all the "Gods" to "Gawds." It was the same lady who made Anna substitute the word "place" for "house," because "house" sounded too bold.



York." The woman has a baby, which annoys Steve, and when he knocks the woman down, another man opportunely comes to the rescue. She is told by the bully that if she leaves or "holds out" on him, he will send her to jail and deprive her of the child. She is caught in the web. The newcomer, a fugitive from justice, is attracted by the woman, and gives her money to go away with. But Steve, who has been hiding, reenters, kills the other man, and "plants" the revolver in order to implicate the woman when the police arrive. They come a moment later, and she is taken away, as the baby cries "Maa-maaaa." One of the plainclothes men takes the infant and speaks to it: "Mama's gone now. I'm your mama now." Curtain.

In spite of the artificiality of the play, the end is affecting.

*Thirst* is a more original conception. It is called a "tragedy." There are three characters: a gentleman, a dancer, and a West Indian mulatto sailor. The scene passes on the life raft of a wrecked steamer in mid-ocean. "Here and there on the still surface of the sea, the fins of sharks may be seen slowly cutting the surface of the water in lazy circles." (Rather hard on the director, this bit.) The play opens with these lines:

THE DANCER—(*Raising herself to a sitting posture and turning piteously to the Gentleman.*) "My God! My God! This silence is driving me mad! Why do you not speak to me? Is there no ship in sight yet?"

The episode shows three pitiable remnants of humanity dying of thirst. The sailor sits apart crooning a "mo-

notonous negro song." The gentleman and the dancer are convinced that he has drinking water. The woman therefore approaches him and offers her necklace for a drink, but the sailor persists in denying that he has water. The woman then offers herself. The stolid negro is still unmoved. Then she dies. The negro shows signs of hope, sharpens his knife and glancing toward the body, addresses the gentleman: "We shall eat. We shall drink." Whereupon the gentleman pushes the woman's body off the raft. The negro, mad with rage, plunges his knife into the other's back, is himself caught in the desperate embrace of the wounded man, and the two totter off the edge of the raft. "The sun glares down like a great angry eye of God. . . . On the raft the diamond necklace lies glittering in the blazing sunshine."

The play is written in an exaggerated and rhetorical style, but there is an air of sincerity about it. The idea is reminiscent of Jack London, and I imagine the development of the situation owes something to the vivid scenes in the concluding chapters of *The Call of the Wild*.

The best that can be said of *Thirst* is that it is a forthright and daring bit of melodrama.

*Recklessness* is a swiftly moving melodrama of revenge, as conventional as any Grand Guignol thriller. A husband returns home to learn that his wife is having an affair with the chauffeur. After getting his facts from a jealous maid, he sends the chauffeur out, knowing that the steering-gear of the car is out of order—and we are supposed to shudder at the knowledge that he rides to certain death. As his body is brought in, the woman kills herself.

*Warnings* is in two scenes. The first introduces a wireless operator at home. A typical slice of life from the bread-and-butter Bronx type of realistic play popularized by Eugene Walter. Knapp is employed aboard a transatlantic liner, and as the play opens he has just learned that he is in danger of becoming stone-deaf at any moment. This scene states the man's problem and shows that for the sake of his family he dare not tell his employers of his infirmity.

The second scene is Knapp's cabin aboard the ship in mid-ocean. The steamer is sinking, and the operator is desperately signaling for help, but can get no answer.

"Oh, my God! It's come!" he says to the Captain, "I can't hear anything. It's happened just as the doctor said it might. . . . Oh, I should have told you, sir, before we started—but we're so poor, and I . . ." etc. He then shoots himself.

O'Neill hit upon a big situation here, but he developed it literally and obviously. To begin with, it was hardly necessary to devote a whole scene to showing Knapp's family: all he had to do was to make it clear that the operator could not afford to give up his job. Then—a more serious matter—there was no need for Knapp to blurt out that the doctor had told him. If he had without warning suddenly lost his hearing, he could hardly be blamed for that. Of course, the point is that he feels his responsibility, but it might take some time for his conscience to drive him to a confession of his guilt.

*Fog* is the best play in the book. It is the earliest of the O'Neill plays to show the artist's attempt to reach out beyond the limits of literal surface realism—or rather,

the first to carry out successfully the particular kind of super-naturalism he was later to use so effectively.

The scene is in the "life-boat of a passenger-steamer drifting helplessly off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. A dense fog lies heavily upon the still sea." The characters are a Poet, a Man of Business, a Polish Peasant Woman, a Dead Child, Sailors, and an Officer. In the boat are the poet, the business man, the woman and her dead child. They drift up to the edge of an iceberg, waiting for help. They hear a steamer whistle, but the Poet prevents the Business Man from calling, in order to save the steamer from running into the iceberg. We see, by this time, that the play is not conceived as a realistic transcript of life: the Poet is a symbolic embodiment of idealism, and the Business Man an abstract figure suggesting materialism. For the moment it looks as though all were lost; then the fog lifts and the boat approaches. The sailors have been guided in their direction by the voice of the child. Meantime the peasant woman has died.

The scene is very dramatic:

THE OFFICER—Too bad! But the child is all right, of course?

THE POET—The child has been dead twenty-four hours. He died at dawn yesterday . . .

*Fog* is a dramatic parable with a sudden flash of beauty at the end. Technically, it foreshadows the so-called expressionistic scenes in *The Hairy Ape*.

What one would think of the five plays in *Thirst* if one knew nothing else of their author's work is hard to say. It is easy to see in them an occasional indication of talent,

to read into them signs of promise. But I cannot honestly regard them as more than fairly well-done experiments by a somewhat talented beginner. They show a knowledge of the technical side of the theater, and they are potentially dramatic. Best of all, they show the writer's efforts to relate something about life. Except in *Warnings*, the dramatist has gone to the heart of his situation, and hit the nail on the head. But in characterization and dialogue he is noticeably deficient. Here he follows fiction and melodrama; he is not yet able to utilize fully what he knows of life.

His next two plays were full-length: *Bread and Butter*—in four acts—and *Servitude*—in three. Neither play has ever been acted or printed, and in the official list they are marked "destroyed." Both were written in 1914, before O'Neill went to Harvard.

*Bound East for Cardiff*, the one really mature play he wrote in these 'prentice years, belongs, strangely enough, to the year 1914. It was followed by *Abortion*, another one-acter, produced in 1916, but never printed. In 1915 came the two plays written in English 47, the one-act adaptation called *The Dear Doctor*, and the long play, *The Second Engineer*, also called *The Personal Equation*, which have already been discussed. To the year 1915 also belong the one-acters *A Knock at the Door* (a comedy), *The Sniper*, and *Belshazzar*, a Biblical play in six scenes, written in collaboration with a friend and fellow-student, Colin Ford. The first and last were never produced or printed, but *The Sniper* was produced by the Provincetown Players in 1917.

Eight short plays and one long one were written in

1916. Four of these were destroyed without having been printed or acted: *The Movie Man*, a comedy; *Atrocity*, a pantomime; *The G. A. M.*, a farce-comedy, and *Now I Ask You*, a farce-comedy in three acts.

The plays that were kept are *Before Breakfast*, *Ile, In the Zone*, *The Long Voyage Home*, and *The Moon of the Caribbees*.

In 1917 no plays were written. In 1918 he wrote the first of his long plays that reached the stage, *Beyond the Horizon*. Only two of that year's plays were not produced: *Till We Meet* and *Shell-Shock*, both in one act. *The Rope*, *The Dreamy Kid*, and *Where the Cross is Made*—all in one act—were produced and published. A long play—*The Straw*, produced in 1921—was written toward the end of the year.

Then came three one-act plays in 1919: *Honor Among the Bradleys*, *The Trumpet*, and *Exorcism*—the last two comedies. Only *Exorcism* was produced, and none have been printed. The long play, *Chris Christopherson*, also belongs to the same year.

From this time on he wrote no more one-act plays.

With the production of *Beyond the Horizon* early in 1920, O'Neill's years of apprenticeship came to a close.

"I am no longer interested," he said in 1924,<sup>4</sup> in the one-act play. It is an unsatisfactory form—cannot go far enough. The one-act play, however, is a fine vehicle for something poetical, for something spiritual in feeling that cannot be carried through a long play."

<sup>4</sup> New York Herald-Tribune, Nov. 16, 1924.



Early in 1919 *The Moon of the Caribbees* and *Six Other Plays of the Sea* were published in book form. Besides the title play, the volume included *Bound East for Cardiff*, *The Long Voyage Home*, *In the Zone*, *Ile*, *Where the Cross is Made*, and *The Rope*.

The first of these that I ever saw produced was *In the Zone*. The impression of that production was still fresh in my mind when in May, 1919, I opened the new volume. I was reviewing books for the Sun, and I told Grant Overton, the book section editor, that I thought this young O'Neill deserved a special article. "Go ahead," he assented. "Fine stuff!"

My article concluded with the words:

"Having demonstrated his skill in the one-act form and, at least to me and his manager, in the three-act, I see no reason why O'Neill should fail to be recognized as our leading dramatist. O'Neill is not perfect, he is not free from defects of characterization and style, but he is better equipped than any other young American. He promised five years ago, with his *Thirst* and other plays; since then he has fulfilled his promise; he has now only to develop, to widen his vision of men and women and do his best, unhampered by the material success that is sure to come to him."

In this article I had given high praise to *In the Zone*, and I still think better of it than O'Neill does, but my words called forth an interesting letter, in which he said:

". . . But I by no means agree with you in your high estimate of *In the Zone*. To me it seems the least significant of all the plays. It is too facile in its conventional

technique, too full of clever theatrical tricks, and its long run as a successful headliner in vaudeville proves conclusively to my mind that there must be 'something rotten in Denmark.' At any rate, this play in no way represents the true me or what I desire to express. It is a situation drama lacking in all spiritual import—there is no big feeling for life inspiring it. Given the plot and a moderate ability to characterize, any industrious playwright could have reeled it off. . . . I consider *In the Zone* a conventional construction of the theater as it is."

I feel that O'Neill was here expressing his impatience with popular approval. *In the Zone* was popular; how, therefore, could it be good? In the same letter he compared it with *The Moon of the Caribbees*, a far finer work, though not so effective. Still, *In the Zone* is by no means without its implications, and while it is limited in its appeal, it is extraordinarily well done. It relates an episode aboard the tramp steamer "Glencairn." The year is 1915, and the time midnight, just after the steamer has entered the submarine zone. In the fo'c'sle the sailors are in a state of high nervous tension. One of them, Smitty, behaves suspiciously, which leads the others to believe he is a German spy. He is out of the fo'c'sle at the time, and they take from his trunk a box, which they dump first in a pail of water, and then open. They find only a bundle of letters from the girl Smitty was engaged to, and in reading them learn what has happened: he had been thrown over because he drank, and had gone to sea in desperation. Smitty meantime comes in, but before he can stop them, they bind him to his bunk and go on reading the letters. As the story unfolds, the men are

ashamed, and at last release Smitty in silence. From one of the letters a dried flower flutters and falls to the floor. How O'Neill must regret that touch!

*The Moon of the Caribbees* is no doubt a finer piece of work. In the letter just quoted O'Neill continues:

" . . . Whereas, *The Moon of the Caribbees*, for example—(my favorite)—is distinctively my own. The spirit of the sea—a big thing—is in this latter play the hero. While *In the Zone* might have happened just as well, if less picturesquely, in a boarding house of munition workers. Let me illustrate by a concrete example what I am trying to get at. Smitty in the stuffy, grease-paint atmosphere of *In the Zone* is magnified into a hero who attracts our sentimental sympathy. In *The Moon*, posed against a background of that beauty, sad because it is eternal, which is one of the revealing moods of the sea's truth, his silhouetted gestures of self-pity are reduced to their proper insignificance, his thin whine of weakness is lost in the silence which it was mean enough to disturb, we get the perspective to judge him—and the others—and we find his sentimental posing much more out of harmony with truth, much less in tune with beauty, than the honest vulgarity of his mates. To me *The Moon* works with truth, and *Beyond the Horizon* also, while *In the Zone* substitutes theatrical sentimentalism. I will say nothing of the worth of the method used in the two short plays save that I consider *In the Zone* a conventional construction of the theater as it is, and *The Moon* an attempt to achieve a higher plane of bigger, finer values. But I hope to have all this out with you when we meet. Perhaps I can explain the nature of my feeling for the impelling, inscrutable forces behind life which it is my ambition to at least faintly shadow at their work in my plays."

I did not see *The Moon* until it was revived a year or two after publication, or I might have been more enthusiastic in reviewing it. I find it a fairly successful attempt to suggest, through the use of rhythmical prose, certain sensations—not the spirit of the sea, but the spirit of man's loneliness in the presence of nature. O'Neill has indeed created, with the most meager effects, a background for his drama, setting against it one pitiful bit of broken manhood. You feel something of the pulse of nature.

But something is lacking. The dramatist has conceived his situation and characters as a tiny episode in a vast epic. The words uttered by his men and women, true and fitting as they are, somehow fail to set vibrating the epic chords within us. They are thin, they lack that richness that lends to Conrad's words (I mean his dialogue—it is not fair to compare his descriptions to the dialogue of a dramatist) the full magic of poetry. O'Neill leaves too much to the director and the stage-carpenter: for drama which is poetic in conception must be poetic in execution. But *The Moon of the Caribbees* is none the less a play of rare power. There is practically no story in it: a sailor speaks aloud his dreams and disappointments, while his mates carouse. There is a fight, a man is killed, and the curtain falls.

I have already spoken of *Bound East for Cardiff*. Of the score of plays written during the first three years, this is easily the best. It was the first of O'Neill's plays to be produced. The scene, like that of *In the Zone*, is laid in the fo'c'sle of the "Glencairn," and the principal characters are the same as in *The Long Voyage Home* and

*The Moon.* The episode is played during a "foggy night midway on the voyage between New York and Cardiff." The sailor Yank lies dying in his bunk, while the others tell yarns and exchange reminiscences. Yank takes a turn for the worse, quietly rambles on, wishing he had never gone to sea, and then dies.

This is an unpretentious episode, moving, tense, yet with scarcely a vestige of "theater." It is hard to believe that *Recklessness* and *Warnings* were written by the same man in the same year.

*The Long Voyage Home* is more elaborate, with a broader canvas. It is, as George Middleton said of his own one-act plays, the "epitome of a larger drama which is suggested in the background."

The scene is the bar of a "low dive on the London waterfront." The crew of the "Glencairn" have just been paid off. Olson the Swede, with two years' savings on him, wisely refuses to drink. He has for years planned to go home and start farming, but every time he was paid off he squandered his money. At last it seems he is about to realize his dream. But he is persuaded to take a soft drink—which is drugged. He is robbed, carried out by a couple of thugs and put aboard another ship bound on a two years' voyage round the Horn.

A moment later his comrades enter and find him gone. They are told he has disappeared with one of the girls. Driscoll grins: "Who'd think Ollie'd be sich a divil wid the wimmin? 'Tis lucky he's sober or she'd have him stripped to his last ha'penny. (*Turning to COCKY, who is blinking sleepily.*) What'll ye have, ye little scut? (*To JOE*) Give me whiskey. Irish whiskey!"

That is all. The ironic note at the end is characteristic. There is something pathetic and painful about this incident: it is scarcely tragic. The Swede's ill fortune is brought about by a trick. Really, the fellow's predicament is no more nor less than a case of hard luck.

In *Ile* we have something far different. The theme is one that Balzac never tired of using—the consuming passion of man for an idea. Captain Keeney is a hard New England whaling captain, dominated by an unconquerable pride. At the end of the two years' period for which his crew have signed up he has only a small part of his quota of "ile." "It ain't the damned money," he says, "what's keepin' me up in the Northern Seas, Tom, but I can't go back to Homeport with a measly four hundred barrel of ile. I'd die fust. I ain't never come back home in all my days without a full ship. Ain't that the truth?" The crew are mutinous, and the Captain's wife has become nearly insane from loneliness and anxiety. Only the prospect of her complete breakdown can alter his determination to push on for the "ile," but the instant open water is ahead and whales are sighted, he reverses his decision. The woman goes crazy.

Here is the stuff of tragedy, and *Ile* is about as near to tragedy as any one-act play can come. This is no facile situation contrived to produce a theatrical "kick." A man is driven by an almost irresistible passion; opposed to him are a mutinous crew. His wife, whose happiness, sanity, life perhaps, depend on his returning home, precipitates the tragedy. In the moment of his trial the man's character is tested to the limit; and because of what he is, he makes his momentous decision.



Do you remember Conrad's magnificent story, *Freya of the Seven Isles*? It tells of a man who risked everything once too often—whose pride brought him and his fair ship to ruin. In *Ile* O'Neill has carried over into the theater something of that beautiful tragic irony which Conrad suggests in the best of his narratives.

*The Moon of the Caribbees*, with all its color and implied drama, cannot compare with *Ile*. In *Ile* you feel the inevitability of the tragic ending: it seems almost as though the dramatist were holding back the ultimate truth inherent in his situation, fearing to state it in all its cruelty.

Does not every tragic writer come face to face with his catastrophe somewhat reluctantly? It is only the second-rater who makes you feel that he rather enjoys the sorrow and terror of his characters. Perhaps that is why the work of the great tragic poets is always tempered with compassion?

The next play in the volume is a by-product. In a letter written to Nathan, O'Neill says of it:

"I suppose I shall be credited on all sides with having made *Where the Cross Is Made* into a long play, yet the reverse is the real truth. The idea of *Gold* was a long play one from its inception. I merely took the last act situation and jammed it into the one-act form because I wanted to be represented on the Provincetown Players' opening bill two seasons ago. I mention this only because I know how impossible it is to expand a natural short play into a long one, and would hardly make such a futile mistake. *Gold* was always full length to me."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Reprinted, by permission of Isaac Goldberg, from the Boston Transcript.

The play is a melodramatic contraption. It requires far too much explanation, and even when that is made, it remains at best only a stunt. In another letter to Nathan <sup>6</sup> he says: “. . . But where did you get the idea that I really valued *Where the Cross Is Made*? It was great fun to write, theatrically very thrilling, an amusing experiment in treating the audience as insane—that is all it means or ever meant to me. . . .”

Since the piece is a part of the long play *Gold*, it is not necessary to say more of it in this place.

*The Rope* is the last play in the *Moon* collection. It was the bitterest and in some respects the most mature play he had written up to the year 1918. It is a study in hatred. The central character is Abraham Bentley, a miser, one of those hard, militant-Christian New Englanders, like Ephraim in *Desire Under the Elms*.

*The Rope* exhibits an ugly set of characters. It borders on the grotesque; it is crude, and there is far too much explanation of the past history of the characters; yet it has a grim beauty in it. “There is,” as O’Neill said years later, “beauty even in its [life’s] ugliness.” I think there is no beauty that has not its roots in what is, or seems to be, ugliness.

This play of hatred and pettiness—with all its crudity—is the first of a kind that O’Neill in after years was to develop into a powerful and effective art-form. *Diff’rent* stems from it, and *Desire Under the Elms*, both of them almost lyric emanations from the back-wash of life, hymns to the vitality of humanity. The dramatist was as yet unable to handle his materials with the ease of a

<sup>6</sup> See note on page 47.

finished artist, but he must have perceived whither he was going.

There are two other one-act plays (not in *The Moon of the Caribbees* volume) to be considered, *Before Breakfast* and *The Dreamy Kid*.

*Before Breakfast* is a technical stunt in the manner of Strindberg's *The Stronger*. Each of these is a monologue in which the words of the one speaking actor skillfully suggest a dramatic background. Mrs. Rowland lives with her husband Alfred in a dingy flat. She prepares breakfast, and addresses Alfred as he is making his toilet. She tells of her struggle to make ends meet while Alfred, "the millionaire Rowland's only son, the Harvard graduate, the poet, the catch of the town . . ." goes off drinking and gallivanting. She taunts him with having married her, and refers in no uncertain terms to the girl he had really loved. Her litany swells to a climax; silence—then the drip-drip of something in the bedroom. Alfred has cut his throat with a razor.

*The Dreamy Kid* completes our record of O'Neill's one-act plays. It is a play about negroes. It is not one of his best one-acters: it is too obvious, too direct, a trifle too melodramatic to be wholly convincing. It is the story of a murderer, pursued by the police, who returns to see his dying mother and is caught.

As if to prove that he has not entirely repudiated the one-act form, O'Neill allowed Frank Shay in 1924 to bring together four of his sea plays into a more or less unified framework under the title *S. S. Glencairn*. The plays so presented were *The Moon of the Caribbees*, *The Long Voyage Home*, *In the Zone*, and *Bound East for*

*Cardiff*. The production of this group by Shay's Barnstormers was so successful that it was taken to New York, where it enjoyed considerable popularity.

In an interview <sup>7</sup> O'Neill says of the Glencairn tetralogy:

" . . . The individual plays are complete in themselves, yet the identity of the crew goes through the series and welds the four one-acts into a long play. I do not claim any originality, though, for the idea, as Schnitzler has already done the same thing in *Anatol*. And doubtless others."

*Ile*, *The Moon*, *Bound East*, and *The Long Voyage Home* were easily the most distinguished one-acters written in America up to their time. During his early years the short form sufficed for him: he had something to say, and he said it. When he was ready with a long play he had after several years' experimenting mastered that form. *Beyond the Horizon* was not an experiment.

Five full-length plays preceded *Beyond the Horizon*, not one of which has been preserved. Usually a sound and invariably an honest critic of his own work, O'Neill had made up his mind that he was going to keep nothing that did not represent the best that he had to give. The first I heard of *Beyond* was in a letter O'Neill wrote me (April 19, 1919), in which he says:

"May I, when I retrieve a borrowed script, send you a copy of my long play, *Beyond the Horizon*, in the hope that you will give it a reading? This play is under contract

<sup>7</sup> N. Y. Herald-Tribune, Nov. 16, 1924.

for production by John D. Williams. It is a first serious attempt to do something bigger than my short plays express, and, because of my faith in its sincerity, I would like to submit it to you. I trust it would help to justify your kind encouragement of my work—an encouragement, I assure you, that means the devil of a lot to me.”

The origin of the play is explained in one of O'Neill's few printed utterances:<sup>8</sup>

“I think,” he writes, “the real life experience from which the idea of *Beyond the Horizon* sprang was this: On the British tramp steamer on which I made a voyage as ordinary seaman, Buenos Aires to New York, there was a Norwegian A. B., and we became quite good friends. The great sorrow and mistake of his life, he used to grumble, was that as a boy he had left the small paternal farm to run away to sea. He had been at sea twenty years, and had never gone home once in that time. . . . Yet he cursed the sea and the life it had led him—affectionately. He loved to hold forth on what a fool he had been to leave the farm. There was the life for you . . . at exactly the right moment . . . he turned up in my memory. I thought, ‘What if he had stayed on the farm, with his instincts? What would have happened?’ But I realized at once he never would have stayed. . . . It amused him to pretend he craved the farm. He was too harmonious a creature of the God of Things as They Are. . . . And from that point I started to think of a more intellectual, civilized type from the standpoint of the above-mentioned God—a man who would have my Norwegian's inborn craving for the sea's unrest, only in him it would be conscious, too conscious, intellectually diluted into a vague, intangible wanderlust. His powers of resistance, both moral and physical, would also probably be correspond-

<sup>8</sup> *A Letter From O'Neill*, New York Times, April 11, 1920.

ingly watered. He would throw away his instinctive dream and accept the thralldom of the farm for—why, for almost any nice little poetical craving—the romance of sex, say.”

Robert Mayo is the victim of his dreams. As he is about to embark on a long sea-voyage with his uncle, he persuades himself that he is desperately in love with the girl who is engaged to his brother Andrew; the girl impulsively throws Andrew over and accepts Robert. Andrew sails in his stead. Before long Ruth discovers that the marriage has been a mistake and thinks she is still in love with Andrew. Three years pass and Robert, ill and disillusioned, with only his child to comfort him, fails miserably in his efforts to make a go of the farm. Andrew returns for a short time, only to bring disillusion both to Ruth and to Robert: the woman realizes that he no longer loves her, and Robert, who had hoped to get from his brother at least a breath of the romance he himself had longed for, finds Andrew only a commonplace and unimaginative materialist. From this point onward, Robert is the central figure. We are shown the mental and physical degeneration of a man who cannot live without illusions. Indeed, each character in the play is obsessed by his desire for what he can never have—for what lies beyond the horizon.

The play made a deep impression on the public. In spite of the uneven acting and the length of the manuscript—which was later cut—and of faulty direction, both critics and theater-goers were moved by the unquestionable sincerity of the characters in this grimly bitter



tragedy of human futility. But there were few critics who gave O'Neill credit for his technical skill.

"You remember," he wrote me (March 13, 1920), "when you read *Beyond*, you remarked about its being an 'interesting technical experiment.' Why is it, I wonder, that not one other critic has given me credit for a deliberate departure in form in search of a greater flexibility? They have all accused me of bungling through ignorance—whereas, if I had wanted to, I could have laid the whole play in the farm interior, and made it tight as a drum a la Pinero. Then, too, I should imagine the symbolism I intended to convey by the alternating scenes would be apparent even from a glance at the program. It rather irks my professional pride, you see, to be accused of ignorance of conventional, everyday technique—I, a Baker 47 alumnus! Professor Baker himself, whose opinion in matters of technique I value as much as any man's . . . , has both read and seen *Beyond* and is delighted with and proud of it. He never mentioned my 'clumsiness.' Perhaps he saw it but appreciated the fact that it was intentional. Well, well, how I do go on! But I've been longing to protest about this to some one ever since I read the criticisms by really good critics who blamed my youthful inexperience—even for poor scenery and the interminable waits between the scenes!"

After all, there was nothing strikingly novel in the division of each act into two scenes, one laid indoors and one out-of-doors. This was a simple method of suggesting a tide-like rhythm in the lives of the characters. Even in this first of his long plays O'Neill was striving for new methods of expressing the spiritual impulse within him.

*Beyond the Horizon* has, I think, been over-praised.

It was only natural that this should be so; was it not the most consistently sustained serious play yet written by an American? In 1920 we were looking for a dramatic Messiah, and *Beyond the Horizon*, with all its shortcomings, seemed to be the first sign of his arrival. But *Beyond*, if produced exactly as it was written, would require almost four hours to act. When O'Neill prepared it for republication two years ago he reduced its bulk by at least one-fifth. Furthermore, it is rather obvious. The hand of the dramatist is too much in evidence: he pauses too often to direct our attention to what he is doing, a fault that in some of his later plays he carries to extremes. He had not quite the courage or the skill to let his characters develop themselves.

But he was growing, and only a few weeks after I had heard of *Beyond*, he was busy with the next play. In June he wrote that his agent had sold his "latest play, *Chris Christopherson*, which I completed this spring. . . . I would like very much to have you read *Chris*. It is a sea play—a character study of an old Swede. May I send you a copy when I get one? At present the agent and Tyler have all the scripts."

This earliest version of *Anna Christie* I have never seen, but shortly after the production O'Neill wrote me:

"My other play, *Chris*, which opened in Atlantic City two weeks ago, is not faring very well financially and I doubt if it will come to New York under its present management. I am just as well pleased. They cut it unmercifully in my enforced absence—on the strength of an adverse decision by an Atlantic City audience, at that!—and little play is left, I guess. It is in six scenes—another

experiment—and the curtain rings down before 10:30—after the cutting. You can imagine the movie effect. I'm too disgusted to witness a performance, but my agent and friends in Philly have reported to me. The play is also miserably cast. As it is a character sketch built up bit by bit you can understand what the rough methods they used accomplished. I hope you'll be able to read this play some day soon. I know it has its faults but I still think it doesn't deserve its present fate, and, if treated sympathetically, would find its public as *Beyond* has."

*Chris* was never published. After the tryout in Atlantic City and Philadelphia it closed, eventually appearing, in rewritten form, as *Anna Christie*.

But *The Straw* is the next in order of composition (1918). The play is a love story about an Irish girl who meets a young newspaper man at a tuberculosis sanatorium. After a few months Stephen leaves, completely cured, to make his way as a writer, while Eileen, whose physical well-being depends wholly upon Stephen, remains. She has only him to live for, and when he returns—no longer in love—she loses courage. But, in his masculine way, Stephen makes a brave pretense, giving Eileen a "straw" of hope. It is not stated in so many words whether Eileen believes him or not; that is not necessary. It is only a matter of time before she will learn the truth.

Once again, as in *Beyond the Horizon*, the dramatist shows his characters basing their lives upon illusion. Sometimes the illusion takes the form of a dream of beauty; sometimes it is love, sometimes crude passion. In the later plays we shall find Ponce de Leon in quest of the illusion of love and fame, Marco Polo after the illusion of power; but always it is the quest that counts—the

quest that never ends, the search for happiness, the hope for an ultimate meaning and justification of life.

In *The Straw* there is little of the expository element which sometimes interferes with the artistic development of O'Neill's themes, but toward the end is an interesting passage. Stephen asks the superintendent why they have been given a "hopeless hope," and Miss Gilpin tells him: "Isn't everything we know—just that—when you think of it? [*Her face lighting up with a consoling revelation.*] But there must be something back of it—some promise of fulfillment,—somehow—somewhere—in the spirit of hope itself."

In this moving play the dramatist has thrown together two young people, face to face with the realities of love and passion—and of death. Love is a hopeless hope, and so is life, and yet there must be a reason. "Come, now," says Stephen, "confess, damn it! There's always hope, isn't there? What do you know? Can you say you know anything?"

This play is filled with a questioning perplexity, a youthful exasperation in the presence of suffering and death. There seems no reason for it all, yet there is the no less perplexing fact of hope, whose presence seems to indicate some pattern in the universe. Later, in *Desire Under the Elms* and *The Fountain*, he was to envisage the tragedy of futility, the heartbreaking failure of man under the pressure of inexplicable forces, yet triumphing not in spite of, but because of, the obstacles which seem to be but are not tragic.

In *The Straw* he was too young to see, think, and feel through to the ultimate goal, but, as an exposition pure

and simple, it is a powerful play. It was not successful in the theater; I think the atmosphere of the setting accounted for that. In laying the scene of a play in a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients the playwright risks losing the normal point of view: I don't mean that every good play has to be lighted by God's gentle sunlight, but a dramatist who departs too far from familiar scenes is likely to alienate the sympathies of his audience.

The production of *The Emperor Jones* in 1920 put the final seal on O'Neill's acceptance as a "regular" dramatist. This play, effectively mounted, well directed, and strikingly acted by the colored actor Charles Gilpin, was a popular success.

From the viewpoint of pure theater *The Emperor Jones* (written 1920) is one of the best of all the O'Neill plays, though most of it is only a dramatic monologue. It is a kind of unfolding, in reverse order, of the epic of the American negro.

O'Neill has told the story of the play's origin in an interview:<sup>9</sup>

"The idea of *The Emperor Jones* came from an old circus man I knew. This man told me a story current in Hayti concerning the late President Sam. This was to the effect that Sam had said they'd never get him with a lead bullet; that he would get himself first with a silver one. . . . This notion about the silver bullet struck me, and I made a note of the story. About six months later I got the idea of the woods, but I couldn't see how it could be done on the stage, and I passed it up again. A year elapsed. One day I was reading of the religious feasts in

<sup>9</sup> New York World, Nov. 9, 1924.

the Congo and the uses to which the drum is put there: how it starts at a normal pulse and is slowly intensified until the heart-beat of every one present corresponds to the frenzied beat of the drum. There was an idea and an experiment. How would this sort of thing work on an audience in a theater? The effect of the tropical forest on the human imagination was honestly come by. It was the result of my own experience while prospecting for gold in Spanish Honduras."

The play is composed of a very few simple elements—a human being, a series of vivid pictures, and a monotonous rhythmical drumbeat (a device used by Austin Strong in his stirring melodrama *The Drums of Oude* twenty years ago). *The Emperor Jones* is a magnificent presentment of panic fear in the breast of a half-civilized negro.

In stating my belief that it is not so fine a play as *Desire Under the Elms* or *The Great God Brown* I am not belittling the virtues of *Jones*. It is beautifully and completely what O'Neill at the time intended it to be; if it is not comparable to the later plays it is because in the final analysis it deals with obvious forces in an obvious way. It is not built upon harmonies, but on a single theme, directly stated and reiterated a little monotonously. The play reveals itself at once, not indirectly, insinuatingly, suggestively.

Am I captious in asking that *The Emperor Jones* should suggest more, perhaps, than the dramatist intended? I hardly think so. O'Neill is not merely a dramatist; if he were, this book would never have been attempted: he is an artist who uses the theater as a medium for the expression of his feelings and his ideas on life. I grant that *The Emperor Jones* is a fine achieve-



ment, but it does not belong to the highest order of its writer's works.

In rereading the O'Neill plays I am constantly reminded of the ancient esthetic canon that perfection in art is attainable only through an inexplicable and almost magic collaboration between the work of art and the beholder, and that in this process the very imperfections of the object arousing the stimulus are a contributing factor—that indeed, without them there can be no perfection. So, with O'Neill's best work, its occasional crudeness allows us to complete the circuit, as it were. Now in many of his plays the aim is so far from the achievement that it is not possible to do more than see what he was trying to do and regret that he was unable to succeed.

*Gold* (written 1920) somehow does not "come off." But what a magnificent epic idea. Because of the very limitations of the dramatic form, O'Neill could not prepare his background on the huge scale of his conception: he was compelled to people his stage with characters who are a trifle stiff and commonplace. Captain Bartlett, cast ashore on a desert island with a few of his crew, is a party to the murder of two of his men. He had discovered what he believes to be treasure, and crazed by thirst and a prey to suspicion, he allows the crime to be committed. But already corrupted by gold, he tries to evade all moral responsibility. The Captain and his companions are rescued, and the next act finds them six months later at his home on the California coast. Bartlett has fitted out another ship and is on the point of sailing off once more in quest of his gold. His wife Sarah, ill and suspicious that all is not well, is opposed to the venture. His son

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Nat, gradually learning the facts, is seized with the madness that is undermining his father's life and sanity. He wants to sail with the Captain. As if to strengthen his own faith in his quest, he forces Sarah, ill as she is, to christen the ship. The next day his two companions plot to sail without him and make off with the gold themselves. But they need a captain. Young Drew, engaged to Bartlett's daughter Sue, is persuaded, in Bartlett's interest, to go with them, and when the Captain is at home they sail off, while the old man stands on the hill cursing them.

The last act is a year later. It is a rewritten version of the melodramatic one-acter *Where the Cross is Made*. The schooner has been lost at sea, and the Captain, like John Gabriel Borkman, is but the shadow of his old self. Insane, he is pursued by the fantoms of his two victims and the ineradicable belief that his schooner is on the point of returning, laden with gold. His passion for the treasure has meantime killed his wife and driven Nat mad. At the end he produces a sample of the "gold" he has kept by him in secret, and Nat in a lucid interval realizes that it is only junk. The Captain tears up the map showing where the treasure is buried, and dies.

Here is a magnificent idea, a broad canvas, a plot with infinite possibilities, and characters susceptible of treatment in the grand manner. But *Gold* is little more than a courageous attempt. Captain Bartlett is no mean sniveling coward: he is potentially a Balzacian giant, a Grandet, a Gobseck. Until the very end of the play he is treated from a deliberately realistic standpoint. His venture is in a way heroic; his crimes, therefore, should be

treated heroically, because his quest was a splendid dream. His remorse should be commensurate with his moral stature.

Now, if I am wrong, and O'Neill intended to portray no more than a petty adventurer, then the whole idea of *Gold* is not worth treating. But I am sure he was aiming at something bigger than that and I suspect that the dramatist was simply not equal to his theme. The play looks like the dramatization of an idea, not a living organism. Instead of allowing the characters to go their way and make their own situation, O'Neill guided and directed them. So, in default of that white heat which welds together such elements as O'Neill has imagined, he resorts to the expedient of explanation. Time and again his characters stop to tell us what they are doing and why, instead of going ahead and doing it. In no other important play are his basic shortcomings more strikingly evident. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, in one of the most acute criticisms of O'Neill I have ever seen, takes the American to task for this very fault. "It is," he says, "a little disappointing to a European with his complex background, to see the arrow strike the target toward which he has watched it speeding all the while." Elsewhere in the same article<sup>10</sup> he adds: "The reason for this general weakness is, I think, that the dramatist, unable to make his dialogue a complete expression of human motives, is forced at the end simply to squeeze it out like a wet sponge."

*Gold* is too good to let go as a partly realized work. I hope O'Neill will rewrite it some day.

<sup>10</sup> *Eugene O'Neill*, in the *Freeman*, March 21, 1923.

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It has already been stated that *Anna Christie* (written 1920) was the outgrowth of an earlier play, *Chris*, or *Chris Christopherson*. It was also called *De Old Davil*. This most widely popular of all his plays seems to have given the dramatist a good deal of trouble. Just how to end it was a problem, as we shall shortly see.

In its final version *Anna Christie* is a play about a woman. It was in the beginning a play about Anna's father.

"'Jimmy the Priest's,'" O'Neill says in an interview, "was the original for 'Johnny the Priest's'; which is the saloon setting for the first act of *Anna Christie*." It was here that O'Neill lived in 1911, and it was, he continues, "certainly a hell-hole. . . . The house was almost coming down and the principal house-wreckers were vermin. I was absolutely down, financially, those days, and you can get an idea of the kind of room I had when I tell you that the rent was \$3 a month. . . . I had Chris Christopherson as a room-mate. He had sailed the sea until he was sick of the mention of it. But it was the only work he knew. At the time he was my room-mate he was out of work, wouldn't go to sea and spent the time guzzling whiskey and razzing the sea. In time he got a coal barge to captain. One Christmas Eve he got terribly drunk and tottered away about 2 o'clock in the morning for his barge. The next morning he was found frozen on a cake of ice between the piles and the dock. In trying to board the barge he stumbled on the plank and fell over."<sup>11</sup>

The story deals with the regeneration of Anna under the influence of the sea and the love of a man. It is not until long after her arrival at Jimmy the Priest's that

<sup>11</sup> New York Times, Dec. 21, 1924.

her father learns she has been living for a time as a prostitute. But it is made clear—it is at least asserted and reiterated—that she has preserved a virginal soul, and when she confesses to Burke that she never really loved any man before she met him, we are ready to believe her—at the moment. Living happily on her father's barge, she is ready for a "pure" love when her hero magically emerges out of the blackness of the fog. The passion of man and woman develops rapidly up to the point where Anna confesses, then the man reacts, instinctively rebelling against the idea of marrying the sort of woman he had been used to hiring on occasion. But after getting drunk he returns to her, and the two are united.

Now for O'Neill's problem. I have space only for a few sentences from a letter written to George Jean Nathan<sup>12</sup> in 1921:

"Your criticism certainly probes the vital spot. The devil of it is, I don't see my way out. From the middle of the third act I feel the play ought to be dominated by the woman's psychology, and I have a conviction that dumb people of her sort, unable to voice strong, strange feelings, the emotions can find outlet only through the language and gestures of the heroics in the novels and movies they are familiar with—that is, that in moments of great stress life copies melodrama. Anna forced herself on me, middle of third act, at her most theatric. In real life I felt she would unconsciously be compelled, through sheer inarticulateness, to the usual 'big scene' and wait hopefully for her happy ending. And as she is the only one of the three who knows exactly what she

<sup>12</sup> Boston Evening Transcript, Oct. 31, 1925.

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wants, she would get it. And the sea outside—life—waits. The happy ending is merely the comma at the end of a gaudy introductory clause, with the body of the sentence still unwritten. (In fact, I once thought of calling the play *Comma*.) Of course, this sincerity of life pent up in the trappings of theater is impossible to project clearly, I guess. The two things cancel and negate each other, resulting, as you have said, in a seeming H. A. Jones compromise. Yet it is queerly fascinating to me because I believe it's a new, true, angle."

O'Neill has realized his difficulty. The projection of "sincerity of life" was his problem in *Anna Christie*, but when he was writing the play he discovered that plot—"trappings of theater"—unless it is determined by character, may become character's arch-enemy. His plot was to a certain extent predetermined, but when he got deeper into the soul of Anna he found that he must falsify either one thing or the other, character or the plot as he had outlined it. But the trouble lay deeper: from the very beginning he had made the mistake of not deciding exactly whose play it was to be, Anna's or Chris's. From this confusion came the rebelliousness of his plot before he finished with it. He found his flesh-and-blood people chafing under the restraint of "theater." The whole is not completely fused, and the result is obviously effective and colorful, but not wholly convincing as an interpretation of human character. The play won popular success because of its intrinsic merits in separate scenes, and as a whole because of its threadbare yet ever "safe" philosophy.

In the letter to Nathan, O'Neill goes on to say that he is afraid he hasn't made his "comma" clear:



"My ending seems to have a false definiteness about it that is misleading—a happy-ever-after which I did not intend. I relied on the father's last speech of superstitious uncertainty to let my theme flow through and on. It does not do this rightly. I now have the stoker not entirely convinced by the oath of a non-Catholic, although he is forced by his great want to accept her in spite of this. In short, that all of them at the end have a vague foreboding that although they have had their moment, the decision still rests with the sea which has achieved the conquest of Anna."

What O'Neill did not see was that the union of two lovers *is* a happy ending, no matter what is hinted at regarding their future. This is not only a convention of the theater, it is a psychological fact. He no doubt felt that in actual life Anna and Burke would under the circumstances marry, and he was quite right in closing his play with that situation. But at the same time he didn't want to write the usual play about a prostitute "purified" by love—that seemed too conventional, so he took a woman who was really not a prostitute at all, just a normal healthy girl who almost by accident drifted into a profession that was distasteful to her. She is capable of love, and we are sure there is nothing vicious in her at all.

But is this not a fatal weakness? For purposes of dramatic effect she is at first shown to be a vulgar, cynical streetwalker; at the proper moment she breaks down and confesses to her lover, and after it has been established that she is really "pure" in soul, she is ready to marry the "hero." In this way the playwright sought to do more than he could legitimately do: shock us by the

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spectacle of "vice," and then turn round and ask us to forget it. No, Anna is hardly consistent.

Fundamentally, the play lacks point. If Anna were really affected by her new life, it is necessary that she should undergo some radical conversion besides that effected by her passion for Burke, but since she never was a daughter of joy, her only problem is the minor problem of readjustment to a background different from what she had been used to. Supposing, however, that she had been really vicious, that—though she had never loved any man she met in the way of business—she had had to fight the allurements of the flesh, would not this have been the basis for a really great drama? As it is, the issue is only too clear, and the struggle hardly worth showing. In fact, there is scarcely any struggle.

*Anna Christie* was not conceived in its entirety. Its outstanding merits lie in occasional scenes and in matters of detail. The first act, for instance, is as fine as anything in the whole range of O'Neill's work; the character of Chris—except for an over-insistence on the "old devil sea" motif—is admirable; the dialogue, on the whole, is better than anything (except in *The Moon of the Caribbees* and *Ile*) he had written up to that time. But as a whole, in spite of some of the most skillful play-writing we have seen on our stage, *Anna Christie* is not altogether right.

The somber two-act play, *Diff'rent* (written 1920), was never a great success in the theater, and there are few even among O'Neill's admirers who care for it. It was not received very favorably, and shortly after the opening O'Neill wrote to Nathan referring to the poor "press."

He says: "Well, this is rather reassuring. I had begun to think I was too popular to be honest."

In this play O'Neill has a firm grasp on his situation; he knew his characters and was able to make them speak and act, not from his scenario, but in accordance with their ideas and impulses. In *Diff'rent* I am not conscious of the interplay of intellectual motives, nor—until the very end—of the directing idea or guiding hand of the dramatist. I am, as a matter of fact, present at a situation which is determined by human beings.

Emma Crosby learns that Caleb Williams, a sailing captain to whom she is engaged, has had an affair with a native woman in the South Sea Islands. She has always believed him sexually pure, "diff'rent" from other men, and the shock of the discovery leads her to break the engagement. The second, and last, act is laid in Emma's home thirty years later. Emma is an embittered victim of sex-suppression. Caleb's nephew, Benny, a typical American doughboy recently returned from France, is deliberately "stringing" the old maid in order to get money out of her.

The picture of these two offers one of those contrasts that O'Neill so often uses to intensify his situations:

*"As the curtain rises, EMMA and BENNY ROGERS are discovered. She is seated in a rocker by the table. He is standing by the victrola on which a jazz band record is playing. He whistles, goes through the motions of dancing to the music. He is a young fellow of twenty-three, a replica of his father in Act One, but coarser, more hardened and cocksure. He is dressed in the khaki uniform of a private in the United States Army. The thirty*

*years have transformed EMMA into a withered, scrawny woman. But there is something revoltingly incongruous about her, a pitiable sham, a too-apparent effort to cheat the years by appearances. The white dress she wears is too frilly, too youthful for her; so are the high-heeled pumps and clocked silk stockings. There is an absurd suggestion of rouge on her tight cheeks and thin lips, of penciled make-up about her eyes. The black of her hair is brazenly untruthful. Above all there is shown in her simpering, self-consciously coquettish manner that laughable—and at the same time irritating and disgusting—mockery of undignified age snatching greedily at the empty simulacra of youth. She resembles some passé stock actress of fifty made up for a heroine of twenty.”*

The pitiful Emma is gradually drawn into the snare set by the heartless doughboy, deceived into believing that the youth is going to marry her. The steps by which Emma approaches the deliciously sweet discussion of sex are shown with such consummate skill that the ridiculous old woman becomes an almost tragic figure. All the repressions of a lifetime are in one brief hour brought to the surface. Notice how she approaches her discussion of the “forbidden” topic:

EMMA—(*Then suddenly, wagging an admonishing finger at him and hiding beneath a joking manner an undercurrent of uneasiness*). I was forgetting I got a bone to pick with you, young man! I heard them sayin’ to the store that you’d been up to callin’ on that Tilly Small evenin’ before last.

BENNY—(*With a lady-killer’s carelessness*). Aw, I was passin’ by and she called me in, that’s all.

EMMA—(*Frowning*). They said you had the piano goin’ and was singin’ and no end of high jinks.

BENNY—Aw, these small town boobs think you're raising hell if you're up after eleven.

EMMA—(*Excitedly*). I ain't blamin' you. But her—she ought to have better sense—at her age, too, when she's old enough to be your mother.

BENNY—Aw, say, she ain't half as old—(*Catching himself*). Oh, she's an old fool, you're right there, Emmer.

EMMA—(*Severely*). And I hope you know the kind of woman she is and has been since she was a girl.

BENNY—(*With a wink*). I wasn't born yesterday. I got her number long ago. I ain't in my cradle, get me! I'm in the army! Oui! (*Chuckles*) . . . These small town skirts don't hand me nothin'. (*With a grin*.) You forget I was in France—and after the dames over there these birds here look some punk.

EMMA—(*Sits down—wetting her lips*). And what—what are those French critters like?

BENNY—(*With a wink*). Oh, Boy! They're some pip-pins! It ain't so much that they're better lookin' as that they've got a way with 'em—lots of ways. (*He laughs with a lascivious smirk*.)

EMMA—(*Unconsciously hitches her chair nearer his. The turn the conversation has taken seems to have aroused a hectic, morbid intensity in her. She continues to wet her lips and pushes back her hair from her flushed face as if it were stifling her*). What do you mean, Benny? What kind of ways have they got—them French girls. . . . Tell me! Tell me all about 'em. You needn't be scared—to talk open with me. I ain't as strict as I seem—about hearin' things. Tell me! I've heard French girls was awful wicked.

Emma's disillusion is swift and cruel. In spite of what Caleb and her relatives tell her she clings to her pathetic illusion. "Just because I'm a mite older'n him—," she

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tells Caleb, "can't them things happen jist as well as any other—what d'you suppose—can't I care for him same as any woman cares for a man? But I do! I care more'n I ever did for you!" It is Benny who deals the final blow: if his uncle buys him off, he will promise not to carry out his threat of marrying. "Say, honest, Aunt Emmer, you didn't believe—you didn't think I was really stuck on you, did you? Ah, say, how could I? Have a heart! Why, you're as old as ma is. Ain't you, Aunt Emmer? (*He adds ruthlessly.*) And I'll say you look it, too!"

The end of the play is unnecessarily violent. Caleb hangs himself, and the moment Emma learns of it, she "moves like a sleepwalker toward the door," murmuring, "Wait, Caleb, I'm going down to the barn"—to put an end to herself.

Murder and suicide must be sparingly used in the theater. Such violence loses its tragic quality unless it is shown to be inevitable. It is a facile expedient of the playwright who doesn't know what else to do or, in the hands of a more conscientious artist, an equally facile way of bringing his plot to a full stop, emphasizing the tragic element in his story.

In *Diff'rent*, though O'Neill shows both Caleb and Emma driven to extremes, I am neither emotionally nor intellectually persuaded that they would commit suicide. There are many who either dare not, or perhaps do not want to, kill themselves—even though they believe they have nothing more to live for—who go on living in quiet desperation. Caleb and Emma are such. To kill them off at the end is an act of mercy, and O'Neill's mood here



was anything but merciful: he is after truth. Notice that in *Desire Under the Elms*, where the tragedy is more bitter, and the passion deeper, there is no suicide, though all three of the chief characters are even more clearly justified than Caleb or Emma. They go on living. "Life doesn't end," says O'Neill. "One experience is but the birth of another."

I have already spoken of O'Neill's constant search for new forms with which to express the subtlest shades of meaning. Being in no sense a purveyor of theatrical commodities, he takes an artist's delight in facing new difficulties. An obstacle easily overcome is an obstacle scarcely worth attacking. But there is more to this than the joy of the craftsman. O'Neill is always striving to show his characters and develop his situations in the most emphatic manner possible, to dig down as deep into their souls as he can, and to exhibit in his plays only what really matters. There is no one way of doing this: "technique" for such a man is a barren and meaningless bit of jargon. Each new play brings into being its own specially articulated structure. Surface realism suffices for one set of characters, old-fashioned romance for another, and so on.

Recently several young Germans have popularized a mechanical sort of technique known as "Expressionism." It is an outgrowth of certain devices employed by Strindberg and Wedekind, based to a certain extent on the philosophy of Nietzsche. "Expressionism" in the theater is a misleading term. It is not radically different from what most artists have used from the earliest times.

Now many critics have called O'Neill an Expressionist, because *The Hairy Ape* and, to a lesser extent, *The Em-*

*peror Jones* resemble certain plays of Toller, Hasenclever, Kaiser and other so-called Expressionists. It is also asserted that he has been considerably influenced by the young Germans. I asked him what he knew about the recent dramatic developments in Middle Europe, and whether he had consciously or otherwise utilized the methods of Kaiser and the others.

"The first Expressionistic play that I ever saw," he answered, "was Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*, produced in New York in 1922, after I'd written both *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. I had read *From Morn to Midnight* before *The Hairy Ape* was written, but not before the idea for it was planned. The point is that *The Hairy Ape* is a direct descendant of *Jones*, written long before I had ever heard of Expressionism, and its form needs no explanation but this. As a matter of fact, I did not think much of *Morn to Midnight*, and still don't. It is too easy. It would not have influenced me."

In order to prove to my own satisfaction that I was not inventing evidence after the fact, I recalled having written in 1922 that the three great influences shaping the dramatic output of Young Germany were Nietzsche, Strindberg and Wedekind. To any one who has read thus far, it will be clear that Nietzsche, Strindberg and Wedekind—particularly the first two—have been among the most powerful influences at work on Eugene O'Neill. Like Hasenclever and the rest, he too had felt the futility of trying to express in the old forms the multifariousness of modern life, but unlike them, he based his work on human character—not the type or the abstraction. Yet *The Hairy Ape* is something of an exception. Instead of

intensifying a particular man, he has symbolized him in the person of Yank.

*The Hairy Ape*, he once said,<sup>13</sup> "was propaganda in the sense that it was a symbol of man, who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way. Thus, not being able to find it on earth nor in heaven, he's in the middle, trying to make peace, taking the 'woist punches from bot' of 'em.' This idea was expressed in Yank's speech. The public saw just the stoker, not the symbol, and the symbol makes the play either important or just another play. Yank can't go forward, and so he tries to go back. This is what his shaking hands with the gorilla meant. But he can't go back to 'belonging' either. The gorilla kills him. The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt 'to belong.'"

An intellectual concept, you see, underlies *The Hairy Ape*, a philosophy growing not out of a single human situation, but from certain deductions made by the dramatist about life and society. The idea sprang, however, from a decidedly human origin:

"I shouldn't have known the stokers if I hadn't happened to scrape an acquaintance with one of our own furnace room gang at Jimmy the Priest's. His name was Driscoll, and he was a Liverpool Irishman . . . the synonym for a tough customer . . . Driscoll . . . came to a strange end. He committed suicide by jumping over-

<sup>13</sup> New York Herald-Tribune, Nov. 16, 1924.

board in mid-ocean. . . . Why? It was the why of Driscoll's suicide that gave me the germ of the idea. . . ." <sup>14</sup>

The idea was good, and the play is one of the most interesting of all O'Neill's works. It is a series of short scenes, beginning in the hold of the steamer where Yank "belongs," and ending in the Zoo, where he is killed, and "at last belongs"—"perhaps."

The play holds you because of its tragic irony, its novelty, its underlying idea, its settings; your curiosity is aroused at the beginning, and is not fully satisfied even at the end. But in the last analysis the play remains largely a philosophical and therefore an impersonal work. O'Neill realizes perfectly that a play lives by reason of its human appeal. In the article quoted on page 73 he says: "I personally do not believe that an idea can be readily put over to an audience except through characters. When it sees 'A Man' and 'A Woman'—just abstractions, it loses the human contact by which it identifies itself with the protagonist of the play . . . the character of Yank remains a man and every one recognizes him as such." He realizes that there is no such thing as an abstract plot in life, and that only human beings can make one.

I think O'Neill is mistaken in believing that Yank "remains a man." He has human attributes, but "he is a symbol." Is it possible to make a man and a symbol at the same time? A human being—like Hamlet—may symbolize certain qualities or characteristics, or even sum up a whole philosophy, but when the dramatist deliberately uses a figure in order to make him typify man, or

<sup>14</sup> American Magazine, Nov. 1922.

humanity, he necessarily minimizes the human elements in his story. At least I feel this to be true in the case of Yank. He is supernatural, more or less an abstraction, an idea. Could it be otherwise, granted the dramatist's aim?

Still, he could hardly have employed the same direct methods that served him in *Diff'rent*. I have used the term supernaturalism, and in turning to O'Neill's note on Strindberg in a recent program of the Provincetown Playhouse, I find him speaking of it in a passage whose bearing on *The Hairy Ape* is of particular interest.

"Yet it is only by means of some form of 'supernaturalism' that we may express in the theater what we comprehend intuitively of that self-obsession which is the particular discount we moderns have to pay for the loan of life. The old 'naturalism'—or 'realism,' if you prefer, (I would to God some genius were gigantic enough to define clearly the separateness of these terms once and for all!)—no longer applies. It represents our fathers' daring aspirations toward self-recognition by holding the family kodak up to ill-nature. But to us their old audacity is *blague*, we have taken too many snapshots of each other in every graceless position. We have endured too much from the banality of surfaces."

It is possible, surely, to write a play—even a supernatural play—about recognizably human beings and dispense entirely with the banality of surfaces, but you cannot have your human beings serve these two purposes at the same time. Yank cannot symbolize man and his efforts to "belong," and yet remain a single individual. He might have been a man, and still have embodied

the dramatist's ideas; he might have been treated—like Ephraim in *Desire Under the Elms*—as an individual from whose character we are allowed to draw deductions, and even to generalize, but he is not so treated. It is for this reason that *The Hairy Ape*, for all its fascination, remains a rather cold bit of dramatized philosophy.

*The Hairy Ape*, *The First Man* and *The Fountain* were all written in 1921. A symbolic fantasy, half realistic and half grotesque, a realistic middle-class satire, and a romantic play—all from the pen of the “morbid” O'Neill, and in the same year!

What about *The First Man*? It has puzzled many, it was not successful on the stage, and is generally regarded as one of O'Neill's less successful efforts. It is a most ambitious failure. The play presents the struggle of a high-minded scientist to realize his ideals. He is about to set forth on an expedition in search of the earliest traces of man, and has with the utmost difficulty arranged to have his wife accompany him on his five years' quest. Two years before they had lost their children under tragic circumstances and determined not to have any more. Their lives are thenceforth devoted to Curtis Jayson's work.

As the play opens, however, the Jaysons are face to face with the problem that is to end in tragedy: Martha is going to have a baby. Curt is thunderstruck; his career and life-work are threatened. The worst of it is that Martha seems happy. “Oh, Curt,” she says, “I wish I could tell you what I feel, make you feel with me the longing for a child. If you had just the tiniest



bit of feminine in you—! . . . But you're so utterly masculine, dear! That's what has made me love you, I suppose—so I've no right to complain of it . . . I don't. I wouldn't have you changed one bit! I love you. And I love the things you love—your work—because it's a part of you. And that's what I want you to do—to reciprocate—to love the creator in me—to desire that I, too, should complete myself with the thing nearest my heart!"

The dilemma is clearly (perhaps too clearly) stated in this speech. Both Curt and Martha are intelligent; they understand each other and, except in this one case, each sympathizes with the other's point of view. Then comes the explanation:

"It's all my fault," says Martha, "I've spoiled you by giving up my life so completely to yours. You've forgotten I've one. Oh, I don't mean that I was a martyr. I know that in you alone lay my happiness in these years—after the children died. But we are no longer what we were then. We must, both of us, relearn to love and respect—what we have become."

He will not yet face the issue; but he does love her:

MARTHA—(*In a whisper*). Yes, you love me. But who am I? You don't know.

CURT—(*Frightfully*). Martha! Stop! This is terrible. (*They continue to be held by each other's fearfully questioning eyes.*)

And the curtain falls on the second act. The third is concerned with Martha's accouchement, which is as poignantly suggested as though it were actually taking place

on the stage. Curt's attitude has not changed: he hates the child that has ruined his work, and Martha has already read that hatred in his eyes. That is why Martha is suffering so long and so cruelly. "I was holding her hands," says Curt, "and her eyes searched mine with such a longing question in them—and she read only my hatred there, not my love for her." She dies, giving birth to a boy. This tense drama is played against a background of petty hypocritical relatives, and the sympathetic Richard Bigelow, friend and confidant of Curt and his wife. Curt's brothers, sisters, in-laws, and the rest—products of our middle-class morality—furnish a complex accompaniment to the main theme in their efforts to make a scandal by fixing the paternity of the child upon Bigelow. The suspicions of these people are so low and so absurd that Curt has no notion of them until the play has almost ended. His relatives are, up to the moment when the truth dawns on him, only more or less disagreeable irritants. To make matters worse, Curt is so "hardened" in their opinion that he refuses to see the baby; a final proof, in their eyes, that the child is not his. He then announces his intention of going away. But this is too much for the family.

ESTHER—Yes, you really must think of us, Curt.

CURT—But—I—you—how are you concerned? Pretense? You mean you want me to stay and pretend—in order that you won't be disturbed by any silly tales they tell about me? (*With a wild laugh.*) Good God, this is too much! Why does a man have to be maddened by fools at such a time! (*Raging.*) Leave me alone! You're like a swarm of poisonous flies.

Then when he understands at last what they are driving at, he dashes up, sees the baby, and returns to address the assembled family: “. . . I'll come back (*the light of an ideal beginning to shine in his eyes*). When he's old enough, I'll teach him to know and love a big, free life. Martha used to say that he would take her place in time. Martha shall live again for me and him.”

The idea of the play is almost formulaic: A man whose dreams are ruined—or so he believes—pulled back to earth by the facts of life; at last given a new impetus. The never-ending aspirations of man. The undying hope of the individual, and his ultimate identification with life through something larger than and beyond himself. It is the same in *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Fountain*, and *The Great God Brown*.

*The Fountain* was entirely rewritten and the first act of *Welded* composed in 1922.

*Welded* is the first mentioned for 1923. This is the most compact, the most baldly intellectual of all his plays. It is a work of hard surfaces; the study of a man and woman hopelessly linked to each other by bonds of passion. The theme is a favorite with the French dramatists. Hervieu's *Les Tenaïlles* and Porto-Riche's *Amoureuse* are the best examples of the type in France.

A sensitive man and his no less sensitive wife are tortured on the one hand by their love for each other, and on the other by that curiously perverse but almost universal passion for torturing themselves. Michael Cape has the “forehead of a thinker, the eyes of a dreamer, the nose and mouth of a sensualist.” Eleanor's face is “dominated by passionate, blue-gray eyes. . . . The first impres-

sion of her whole personality is one of charm partly innate, partly imposed by years of self-discipline."

The union of two such persons contains within it the germ of great drama. Says the woman: "Our ideal was difficult. (*Sadly.*) Sometimes I think we've demanded too much. Now there's nothing left but that something which can't give itself. And I blame you for this—because I can neither take more nor give more—and you blame me (*She smiles tenderly.*) and then we fight!"

Their life together is the ebb and flow of love and battle. The play actually starts to move on the eve of battle. The excuse—for something must start the trouble—is jealousy: Michael is jealous of Eleanor's supposed affection for John, which began years before their marriage. He cannot remain satisfied with things as they are: he is a sensitive artist, analyzing himself and his relations with his wife. And she is jealous of his work.

The situation tightens as each threatens to do his utmost to kill his love for the other. He goes out, and Eleanor cries after him: "Go! Go! I'm glad! I hate you. I'll go too! I'm free! I'll go—!"

The second act has two scenes. The first is in John's house. Eleanor arrives, and throws herself into her friend's arms. But she cannot carry out her intentions. There is that in her heart which cannot be killed. "My love for him is my own, not his! That he can never possess!" And she returns home.

The second scene is the shabby bedroom of a prostitute. Michael has come there with the first woman he has picked up. But he is no more able to carry out his intention than Eleanor was. "I can't!" he tells the woman, "I

can't. I'm the weaker. Our love must live on in me. There's no death for it. There's no freedom—while I live."

The last act is back in the Capes' home. Eleanor and Michael "smile with a queer understanding. They act for the moment like two persons of different races, deeply in love but separated by a barrier of language." They realize that they are "welded," indissolubly linked together. It's a fact which they both face, and in facing it sincerely they are given a glimmer of hope. "They stare into each other's eyes. It is as if now by a sudden flash from within they recognized themselves, shorn of all the ideas, attitudes, cheating gestures which constitute the vanity of personality. Everything, for this second, becomes simple for them—serenely unquestionable. It becomes impossible that they should ever deny life, through each other, again."

They are strong, and they can live again, "But we'll hate," says Michael. And Eleanor echoes, "Yes!"

CAPE—And we'll torture and tear, and clutch for each other's souls,—fight—fail and hate again—(*He raises his voice in aggressive triumph.*)—but!—fail with pride—with joy!"

Shortly after the play was taken off I asked O'Neill what the trouble was. "The actors," he answered, "did about as well as they could, but the whole point of the play was lost. The most significant thing in the last act was the silences between the speeches. What was actually spoken served to a great extent just to punctuate the meaningful pauses. The actors didn't get that."

The stage-directions show what the dramatist is driv-

ing at, but no dramatist has a right to leave too much to any actor: the actor is—must be—the more or less inspired servant of the author, and it is the author's business to give him the necessary lines to speak or business to act. Michael tells Eleanor that he wants to say so much what he feels, but can "only stutter like an idiot!" It was O'Neill's problem to make the idiotic stutterings of his character express something that mattered. That is the function of dialogue. This last act is too meager, for too much is suggested in the directions, which are a commentary rather than a guide, and too little in the dialogue. It is rather a large order to ask any actor and actress to reveal—without words—the fact for instance that it "becomes impossible that they should ever deny life, through each other, again."

What is true of the last act is almost equally true of the others. The play is not intended as surface realism: it is an attempt to strip away all the encumbering non-essentials, to reveal directly two naked souls at war with each other. The plot is as direct and impersonal as a steel machine, the language as analytically summarized as a psychologist's.

Reducing his characters to pale shadows of human beings, and allowing little space for the development of human traits, O'Neill makes his play less a spectacle of life than a philosophical disquisition. His theme, however, required a far different sort of treatment. Remember, his man and his woman are bound together by a physical as well as a spiritual bond. Now physical love, Heaven knows, makes a legitimate and forgivably human appeal in drama, and I see no reason why O'Neill rele-



gated this element not to the background, but completely out of the frame. I have no doubt he felt like Michael, who wanted "to say so much what" he felt, but could "only stutter like an idiot."

What the audience missed in *Welded* is precisely what I miss in the printed text—the breath of life. I seek men and women and find only a pair of animated abstractions. I see what O'Neill intends, but he gives me only arguments, explanations, and reiterated statements. I am always conscious of the steel grip of the manipulator. In the theater I want to give myself up entirely to the matter in hand, allowing my emotions free play. It is the dramatist's business so to move—not to convince or bully—me that I shall know, and therefore understand, something about human beings and life that I had not known before. I don't want to admire his logic (at least not until afterward), and as for the technical means that enabled him to achieve the results he aimed at, I would have it seem that these never existed.

*Welded* is a finely conceived but over-intellectualized study, not a well-rounded, three-dimensional drama about human beings. It is the skeleton of a possibly fine play.

It was inevitable that *All God's Chillun Got Wings* should stir up trouble. I am inclined to believe that no American dramatist, except perhaps O'Neill (and Paul Green), is sufficiently detached to be able to regard intermarriage between whites and blacks in a purely dispassionate manner.

I think, though, that O'Neill took his situation from life as he found it, because it happened to give him a chance to develop a theme that appealed to him. He was

not basically moved by the sociological problem of the American negro any more than Shakespeare was concerned over the quarrel of the Capulets and the Montagues. It is a fact that the marriage of a negro and a white—at present in the United States—arouses hatred and prejudice among all who know of it, and between the contracting parties is almost always sure of precipitating a struggle. But essentially *All God's Chillun* is a drama of love and passion. Isn't that quite enough? There are overtones and subtle suggestions of race memory and fear and hatred, but these are only the accompaniment of the drama. The play is as thrillingly human as *Welded* is abstract, as simple and direct as it could be made.

The opening scenes show in a seemingly casual way the quite unconscious friendship of black and white children. One of these, an earnest young negro, has ambitions; he strives to pass his law examinations and makes tragic efforts to overcome what he knows are his racial shortcomings. He marries a white girl, and for a time the two are happy. But before long they are beset by the problems which generations of blacks and whites have made for themselves. The girl goes crazy and tries to kill her husband, who symbolizes for her an innate and unreasoning fear of the negro. But she recovers, and asks forgiveness:

JIM—I wasn't scared of being killed. I was scared of what they'd do to you after.

ELLA—(*After a pause—like a child*). Will God forgive me, Jim?

JIM—Maybe He can forgive what you've done to me; and maybe He can forgive what I've done to you; but I don't see how He's going to forgive—Himself.

Here is the lowest point to which the tragedy descends; but it cannot rest there. All true tragedy extends beyond itself when the sufferer is given to understand. Though Jim is a "failure," there is in Ella the spark of hope, the symbol of redemption, and just before the play closes he "throws himself on his knees and raises his shining eyes, his transfigured face":

JIM—Forgive me, God—and make me worthy! Now I hear your Voice! . . . Forgive me, God, for blaspheming You! Let this fire of burning suffering purify me of selfishness and make me worthy of the child you send me for the woman you take away!

ELLA—Don't cry, Jim! You mustn't cry! I've got only a little time left and I want to play. Don't be old Uncle Jim now. Be my little boy, Jim. Pretend you're Painty Face and I'm Jim Crow. Come and play!

JIM—Honey, Honey, I'll play right up to the gates of Heaven with you!

O'Neill's error—as a practical dramatist—was in making his nigger a human being. He even forgot the susceptibilities of those good Americans who have laid down the law as to how far a negro may go in his relations with whites, but recognize no law as to how far a white may go with a negro. He utilized a situation so poignant and so tragically beautiful that few otherwise competent critics could see in it a work of art.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> I should like to insert here, as a matter of record, a letter which O'Neill wrote to a Princeton classmate, printed in *The Fifteen Year Record* of the class of 1910:

"Any appreciation of the worth of that play is doubly appreciated by me, because of all the prejudiced and unjust knocks it received when it was enjoying such a storm of unwelcome notoriety last winter. It seemed for a time there as if all the feeble-witted both

*Desire Under the Elms*, written the next year (1924), marks the highest point so far in O'Neill's development as a tragic writer. In this play O'Neill has sounded the depths. He faces life with courage and sanity, and in seeing through his most finely-conceived characters—Eben, Abbie and Ephraim—he has emerged triumphant.

Read what he so admirably stated two years before the play was acted.<sup>16</sup>

“Sure I'll write about happiness if I can happen to meet up with that luxury, and find it sufficiently dramatic and in harmony with any deep rhythm in life. But happiness is a word. What does it mean? Exaltation; an intensified feeling of the significant worth of man's being and becoming? Well, if it means that—and not a mere smirking contentment with one's lot—I know there is more of it in one real tragedy than in all the happy-ending plays ever written. It's mere present-day judgment to think of tragedy as unhappy! The Greeks and the Elizabethans knew better. They felt the tremendous lift to it. It roused

in and out of the K.K.K. were hurling newspaper bricks in my direction—not to speak of the anonymous letters which ranged from those of infuriated Irish Catholics who threatened to pull my ears off as a disgrace to their race and religion, to those of equally infuriated Nordic Kluxers who knew that I had negro blood, or else was a Jewish pervert masquerading under a Christian name in order to do subversive propaganda for the Pope! This sounds like a burlesque but the letters were more so. And then when the play opened nothing at all happened, not even a senile egg. It was a dreadful anticlimax for all concerned, particularly the critics who seemed to feel cheated that there hadn't been at least one murder that first night. And so on ever since. The whole affair was really a most ludicrous episode—not so ludicrous for me, however, since it put the whole theme of the play on a false basis and thereby threw my whole intent in the production into the discard.”

The police, on a technicality, tried to stop the play on the very evening of the opening, by not permitting the children to act in the first scene. But this was read to the audience, and the play went on smoothly.

<sup>16</sup> Philadelphia Public Ledger, Jan. 22, 1922.

them spiritually to a deeper understanding of life. Through it they found release from the petty considerations of everyday existence. They saw their lives ennobled by it. A work of art is always happy; all else is unhappy. . . . I don't love life because it's pretty. Prettiness is only clothes-deep. I am a truer lover than that. I love it naked. There is beauty to me even in its ugliness."

Could this idea be better stated? I called O'Neill an optimist before I had read these words, and by that I meant that he was a militant apostle of Life with a capital L. He dares look upon it without passing judgment; he lays it bare to the best of his ability as an artist and poet.

But he has of late been looking upon it in its nakedness. In *Desire* he has shown a group of peasants, tenacious in their passion for land, for religion, for power, for beauty and sexual gratification. These people—unlike people in everyday life—are cruel and greedy; they talk freely of shameful things fit only to be printed in the Bible. Ephraim, his sons, and his wife are strange composites of good and evil) "vice" is not visited at once with swift punishment: a woman seduces her step-son, and both parties to the crime actually exult in their passion.

*Desire Under the Elms* is too strong for most of us. True, the play ran a year in New York, and two road companies have been doing fairly good business with it.<sup>17</sup> Early in its career at the Greenwich Village Theater a

<sup>17</sup> As these lines are being written news comes from Los Angeles that a company playing *Desire* has been arrested by the city authorities. O'Neill's only remark on hearing of this was a vague question: "Isn't Los Angeles the place where the motion pictures are made?"

New York City official tried his best to close it. His name is Banton. He was opposed by a number of persons who believed at least in O'Neill's sincerity, and a play jury system was inaugurated to inquire into the morals of such immoral productions as *Desire Under the Elms*, *They Knew What They Wanted*, *What Price Glory?*, and *Processional*. The jury could find nothing very subversive in any of them, even in the O'Neill play, which was considered the most dangerous of them all. But the harm had been done: Mr. Banton had advertised the play to the general public, and for almost a year a good portion of the audiences throughout the run went to see it for the smut they believed must be in it. Because of this, the play sounded strangely off-key, though before the trouble started, it was one of the most beautiful I had ever seen. A popular and miscellaneous audience in an uptown theater, composed mostly of persons who were expecting something spicy, could hardly fail to make any actor nervous and self-conscious.

I am surprised that no one brought suit against the management, for so far as I have been able to learn, most of the people who saw the play were disappointed. They were resentful, too, at being forced to witness a powerful and beautiful work of art, which was about as suggestive as a funeral. I think what they were most deeply offended by was the quotation from the *Song of Solomon*.

I saw *Desire Under the Elms* shortly after it opened. When I left the theater I knew I had never been more profoundly moved by any other play. If ever that disputed passage about Katharsis meant anything it meant it here,



for *Desire* purges the soul, sears, tortures and twists it, only to exalt it in the end. O'Neill has built a shining edifice, an epic drama of the workers of the soil, with ingredients as ugly and as beautiful as can be found in our contemporary civilization.

Ephraim Cabot, a New England farmer who believes that "God is hard" and bases his life on that principle, has just married his third wife, Abbie Putnam, an attractive woman of about thirty-five, just half his own age. She marries in order to provide herself with a home. She finds awaiting her young Eben, Ephraim's thirty-two-year-old son by his second wife. Eben, believing that the farm belongs to him, looks upon his new stepmother as a designing and dangerous interloper, and he hates her with all the venom of a true son of Ephraim Cabot. Abbie is both clever and sexually attractive, and in order to keep the farm in her possession she tells her husband that she believes she could still have a child by him. The old man, delighted, promises that if she should so bless him he will make over his property to the new heir. Abbie then proceeds cold-bloodedly to seduce Eben, but during the process she falls desperately in love with him, as he does with her. A son is born to them, though ostensibly he is Ephraim's child. Ephraim believes it is his own child. Abbie, with all her cleverness, has aroused in her heart a passion which wrecks all her plans: the lies necessary for carrying out her plot can no longer be concealed, and Eben tells everything to his father. Ephraim then destroys the last vestige of Eben's illusion by telling him what was, not long since, the literal truth: that Abbie has pretended to love him only in order to make sure of the

property. The young man, in a fury of rage and disappointment, decides to leave home at once, to Abbie's utter despair. The beautiful irony of the situation is not clear to her; she is too deeply attached to Eben to be able to convince him that while she did in the beginning make love to him for an ulterior purpose, she is now almost distracted by her passion. She frantically tells him that she loves him for his own sake, but he will not listen. She must therefore prove, at any cost, that she is finally sincere. She therefore strangles the child. Eben is horror-stricken, and while he is convinced of her love for him, his immediate reaction takes the form of telling the police.

The last scene finds the lovers once more united and in each other's arms. Eben confesses that he is an accomplice; he is ready to pay the penalty together with Abbie. They are taken off by the sheriff and his men, happy and exultant in their complete absorption of one another. They have drunk deep of the draught of life, and have no regrets. They have passed out of the realm where tragedy—as it is ordinarily understood—can touch them. Of “sin” they have no consciousness: victims of Puritanical repressions, of unrepressed passion, and of the mighty current of life, they have fashioned their romance apart from the ugliness and sordidness of everyday life; though they have lived among those whose religion is hateful, they have broken through into the light of day. There among the rocks and the hard soil they have yearned for beauty, and found it.

The framework of this tragedy is rather elaborate; two almost superfluous scenes are introduced at first in

order to show Eben's older half-brothers leaving the farm for California (the time is 1850), and several scenes are devoted to an elaboration of the character of Ephraim. But the inner unity of the play lies in the character of Abbie. In arousing all the repressed passion of Eben she has forgotten—or perhaps never known—that the sexual instinct cannot always be controlled; she has depended on her own diabolical craftiness to see her machinations through to the end. Then suddenly she finds herself caught in her own trap. O'Neill has shown the irony of the situation as surely as any imaginative writer ever caught it, and in those scenes where Abbie frantically tries to prove to Eben her disinterestedness, she stands hopelessly enmeshed in the situation she has herself created.

It is in such scenes as this that O'Neill proves himself a master. There is no trace of "theater"—a trick would spoil everything. He must push on relentlessly to his conclusion. What does Abbie do? She cannot give Eben up, and she cannot remain with Ephraim. She has to show, by violent means, that she cares nothing for the property. One thing stands between them: the child. She therefore, without reflection, kills him.

Now, I do not believe that Abbie would deliberately murder her baby. I believe she would have killed Ephraim, and I think that that is what she ought to have done. But the point cannot be decided by reference to any canon of criticism—no point of importance can.

The murder is not convincing. It is, I think, a mistake, but it does not seriously affect the play. The rest follows inevitably: as in *All God's Chillun*, the

dawn breaks on the man and the woman. "Life doesn't end. One experience is but the birth of another. And even death."

*The Fountain*, as I have said, was written in 1921. It was bought first by Arthur Hopkins, then by the Theater Guild, and produced eventually in 1925 at the Greenwich Village Theater. It ran there for just two weeks and was pretty generally condemned by the press and the small part of the public that went to see it. On the whole, the play seemed rather dull, which was to a certain extent the fault of our American system of long waits between the scenes; partly the fault of the actors, most of whom were untrained in the art of romantic acting; and partly that of the manuscript itself. This play, as conventional in form as *Cyrano de Bergerac*, came as a surprise to nearly every one who knows the work of O'Neill. But actually, it shows only another aspect of his all-embracing outlook on life. It is concerned with the almost wholly imaginary story of the quest of the Fountain of Youth by Juan Ponce de Leon and his ultimate realization that such ventures are and must be doomed to failure when rationally or materialistically conceived, though they become shinningly glorious events when identified with the quest for life, love and beauty. "One must accept," says Juan, "absorb, give back, become oneself a symbol. . . . Juan Ponce de Leon is past! He is resolved into the thousand moods of beauty that make up happiness—color of that sunset, of to-morrow's dawn, breath of the great Trade Wind—sunlight on the grass, an insect's song, the rustle of leaves, an ant's ambitions. I shall know eternal becoming—eternal youth!"

The chant that runs through the play is a lyrical choric comment on the theme:

Love is a flower  
Forever blooming,  
Beauty a fountain  
Forever flowing  
Upward into the source of sunshine,  
Upward into the azure heaven;  
One with God but  
Ever returning  
To kiss the earth that the flower may live.

*The Fountain* is a dramatic poem of exaltation—the reflection of the poet's never-ending aspiration toward life, love and beauty.

Juan seeks the actual Fountain of Youth; his life is dedicated to the lifelong task of finding it; unscrupulous, cruel if need be, he is ruthless in the quest that has become a divine sort of madness. Yet no dreamer finds what he sets out to attain, though some are rewarded spiritually. Through tragedy they learn the lesson of life, divining at last that the effort is worth while in itself. Juan cannot become young again, but he does learn that "there is no gold but love."

O'Neill's note on the program is both instructive and amusing. The last sentence is a fair answer to those who declare the man lacking in a sense of humor. As if he had even been a morbid realist!

"The idea," he says, "of writing a *Fountain* came on finally from my interest in the recurrence in folklore of the beautiful legend of a healing spring of eternal youth. The play is only incidentally concerned with the Era of

Discovery in America. It has sought merely to express the urging spirit of that period without pretending to any too educational accuracy in the matter of dates and facts in general. The characters, with the exception of Columbus, are fictitious. Juan Ponce de Leon, in so far as I've been able to make him a human being, is wholly imaginary. I have simply filled in the bare outline of his career, as briefly reported in the *Who's Who* of the histories, with a conception of what could have been the truth behind his 'life-sketch' if he had been the man it was romantically—and religiously—moving to me to believe he might have been! Therefore, I wish to take solemn oath right here and now that *The Fountain* is not morbid realism."

In spite of its conception, and in spite of the beauty of individual scenes, *The Fountain* is not an entirely successful work of art. I feel that O'Neill has adopted a form not altogether in harmony with his temperament. He knows the form, but I suspect he disdains it as over-facile. Yet he went to great pains to do the job as neatly as possible. To be wholly successful, a play of this type must be written naïvely: it must master the poet. The trouble here is that the poet knew the form so well that he mastered it. Then there is the matter of language. There are scenes toward the end that cry aloud not for fine writing or mere literature, but for poetry. I mean formal verse. The poetic urge, the heat of the poet's passion, seems striving to burst the bonds of the prose, demanding the formal freedom of inspired verse.

Except for *The Ancient Mariner*, "a Dramatic Arrangement of Coleridge's Poem," produced in 1924 at the



Provincetown Playhouse, *The Great God Brown* completes our list of O'Neill's produced plays. Written in 1925, it was produced at the Greenwich Village Theater in January, 1926.

This play, so far as its conception is concerned, is the most subtly beautiful work O'Neill has ever written. In it he has striven to tell, in a vibrant, lyrical style, of man's aspirations; it is a dramatic hymn to man's struggle to identify himself with nature. The tone throughout is mystically ecstatic. As in all his mature plays, man's road passes through the vale of tragedy, but it emerges triumphant.

In order to dispense with a certain amount of otherwise necessary explanation, the dramatist has devised masks for nearly all his characters. "So far as I know," says Kenneth Macgowan, in the program notes, "O'Neill's play is the first in which masks have ever been used to dramatize changes and conflicts in character." He uses them as a "means of dramatizing a transfer of personality from one man to another."

*The Great God Brown* requires explanation, and this the author himself furnished in a letter to the papers. It is so significant that I reprint it in its entirety:

I realize that when a playwright takes to explaining he thereby automatically places himself 'in the dock.' But where an open-faced avowal by the play itself of the abstract theme underlying it is made impossible by the very nature of that hidden theme, then perhaps it is justifiable for the author to confess the mystical pattern which manifests itself as an overtone in *The Great God Brown*, dimly behind and beyond the words and actions of the characters.

I had hoped the names chosen for my people would give a strong hint of this. (An old scheme, admitted—Shakespeare and multitudes since.) Dion Anthony—Dionysus and St. Anthony—the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with the masochistic, life-denying spirit of Christianity as represented by St. Anthony—the whole struggle resulting in this modern day in mutual exhaustion—creative joy in life for life's sake frustrated, rendered abortive, distorted by morality from Pan into Satan, into a Mephistopheles mocking himself in order to feel alive; Christianity, once heroic in martyrs for its intense faith now pleading weakly for intense belief in anything, even Godhead itself. (In the play it is Cybele, the pagan Earth Mother, who makes the assertion with authority: "Our Father, Who Art!" to the dying Brown, as it is she who tries to inspire Dion Anthony with her certainty in life for its own sake.)

Margaret is my image of the modern direct descendant of the Marguerite of Faust—the eternal girl-woman with a virtuous simplicity of instinct, properly oblivious to everything but the means to her end of maintaining the race.

Cybel is an incarnation of Cybele, the Earth Mother doomed to segregation as a pariah in a world of unnatural laws, but patronized by her segregators, who are thus themselves the first victims of their laws.

Brown is the visionless demi-god of our new materialistic myth—a Success—building his life of exterior things, inwardly empty and resourceless, an uncreative creature of superficial preordained social grooves, a by-product forced aside into slack waters by the deep main current of life-desire.

Dion's mask of Pan which he puts on as a boy is not only a defense against the world for the supersensitive painter-poet underneath it, but also an integral part of his character as the artist. The world is not only blind to the man beneath, but it also sneers at and condemns

the Pan-mask it sees. After that Dion's inner self retrogresses along the line of Christian resignation until it partakes of the nature of the Saint while at the same time the outer Pan is slowly transformed by his struggle with reality into Mephistopheles. It is as Mephistopheles he falls stricken at Brown's feet after having condemned Brown to destruction by willing him his mask, but, this mask falling off as he dies, it is the Saint who kisses Brown's feet in abject contrition and pleads as a little boy to a big brother to tell him a prayer.

Brown has always envied the creative life force in Dion—what he himself lacks. When he steals Dion's mask of Mephistopheles he thinks he is gaining the power to live creatively, while in reality he is only stealing that creative power made self-destructive by complete frustration. This devil of mocking doubt makes short work of him. It enters him, rending him apart, torturing and transfiguring him until he is even forced to wear a mask of his Success, William A. Brown, before the world, as well as Dion's mask toward wife and children. Thus Billy Brown becomes not himself to any one. And thus he partakes of Dion's anguish—more poignantly, for Dion has the Mother, Cybele—and in the end out of this anguish his soul is born, a tortured Christian soul such as the dying Dion's, begging for belief, and at the last finding it on the lips of Cybel.

And now for an explanation regarding this explanation. It was far from my idea in writing *Brown* that this background pattern of conflicting tides in the soul of Man should ever overshadow and thus throw out of proportion the living drama of the recognizable human beings, Dion, Brown, Margaret and Cybel. I meant it always to be mystically within and behind them, giving them a significance beyond themselves, forcing itself through them to expression in mysterious words, symbols, actions they do not themselves comprehend. And that is as clearly as I wish an audience to comprehend it. It is Mystery—

the mystery any one man or woman can feel but not understand as the meaning of any event—or accident—in any life on earth. And it is this mystery I want to realize in the theater. The solution, if there ever be any, will probably have to be produced in a test tube and turn out to be discouragingly undramatic.

*The Great God Brown*, as I have said, is the subtlest of all O'Neill's plays: beyond a doubt it is fuller than any other of the poet's sense of the rhythm and multiplicity of life. The language expresses shades of half-realized meanings that are difficult to compress into words and sentences; the style of the writing is charged with a rhythmic ebb and flow that suggests the heartbeats of all humanity.

But it is not as perfect an entity as *Desire Under the Elms*. It aims too high, it puts a burden upon the theater and the actor that I am convinced neither can as yet bear. I am so skeptical as to believe that in the theater all but the play itself is a humble adjunct to the dramatic poet, and that no production can deepen the inner significance of any great play, though it may add other elements, perhaps even a surpassing beauty quite apart from what is in the script itself.

O'Neill's latest produced play is at present written beyond us. If he can be legitimately criticized, it must be on the grounds of having given the theater more than it is capable of showing. He once told me he never consciously considered whether a play of his could or could not be effectively staged. He writes what he has to say and that ends it. If the play is well produced, so much the better; if not, that is an end to the matter.

Of the still unproduced plays there are three, two of them still unfinished—an arrangement of *The Book of Revelations* and *Lazarus Laughs*; and the other—*Marco Millions*—awaiting production by some one. I hear that Mr. Belasco, who had it, is not going to do it. The loss is his.

Since this last-named play is not yet released to the general public, I am not at liberty to discuss it in detail. But I have read the manuscript. I always knew that O'Neill possessed a keen, if quiet, sense of humor, and several years ago I maintained that he could write satirical comedy if he set his hand to it. *Marco Millions* is an inspired comedy, woven into a magnificent romance. Incidentally, I foresee popular success for it.

Meantime O'Neill is working away at new plays. What he will do next, no one can tell. There is nothing he will not try.

"I intend," he says, "to use whatever I can make my own, to write about anything under the sun in any manner that fits or can be invented to fit the subject. And I shall never be influenced by any consideration but one: Is it the truth as I know it—or, better still, feel it? If so, shoot, and let the splinters fly wherever they may. If not, not. This sounds brave and bold—but it isn't. It simply means that I want to do what gives me pleasure and worth in my own eyes, and don't care to do what doesn't. . . . It is just life that interests me as a thing in itself. The why and wherefore I haven't attempted to touch on yet." <sup>18</sup>

Eugene O'Neill, the first American adult artist to devote himself wholly to the writing of plays, is not yet

<sup>18</sup> Philadelphia Public Ledger, Jan. 22, 1922.

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thirty-eight years old. His career extends over a period of only twelve years. I believe he has scarcely more than begun his life work. One of the few living dramatists of the first order, he has already contributed to the theater three or four of the noblest plays of our time. I am convinced that he has it in him to give the world other plays—touching upon the “why and wherefore”—plays that will endure as long as anything that America has produced. Meantime, our drama will be remembered for what he has already written.



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<sup>1</sup> I.e., the group that became known by that name in the fall of 1916.

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